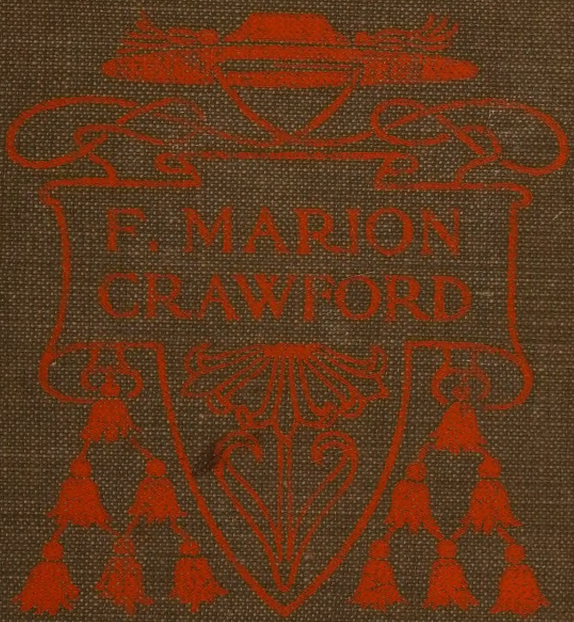
F. MARION
CRAWFORD

Wm. C. Oxman

SHE WAS RESTING ONE HAND ON THE HEAVY TABLE, AND AS SHE SPOKE SHE BENT DOWN AS THOUGH IN BODILY PAIN.

—*Taquisara.*

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF
F. MARION CRAWFORD

In Thirty-two Volumes — *Authorized Edition*

TAQUISARA

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

WITH FRONTISPIECE

P. F. COLLIER & SON
NEW YORK

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TAQUISARA

VOL. I

TAQUISARA.

CHAPTER I.

"WHERE shall I sign my name?"

Veronica Serra's thin, dark fingers rolled the old silver penholder nervously as she sat at one end of the long library table, looking up at the short, stout man who stood beside her.

"Here, if you please, Excellency," answered Lamberto Squarci, with an affable smile.

His fingers were dark, too, but not thin, and they were smooth and dingy and very pointed, a fact which the young princess noticed with dislike, as he indicated the spot on the broad sheet of rough, hand-made paper, where he wished her to sign. A thrill of repulsion that was strong enough to be painful ran through her, and she rolled the penholder still more quickly and nervously, so that she almost dropped it, and a little blot of ink fell upon the sheet before she had begun to write.

"Oh! It is of no importance!" said the Neapolitan notary, in a reassuring tone. "A little ink more or less!"

He had some pink blotting-paper ready, and was already applying a corner of it to the ink-spot, with the neat skill of a professional scribe.

"I will erase it when it is dry," he said. "You will not even see it. Now, if your Excellency will sign — that will make the will valid."

Three other persons stood around Donna Veronica as she set the point of her pen to the paper, and two of them watched the characters she traced, with eager, unwinking eyes. The third was a very insignificant personage just then, being but the notary's clerk; but his signature was needed as a witness to the will, and he patiently waited for his turn. The other two were husband and wife, Gregorio and Matilde, Count and Countess Macomer; and the countess was the young girl's aunt, being the only sister of Don Tommaso Serra, Prince of Acireale, Veronica's dead father. She looked on, with an eager, pleased expression, standing upright and bending her head in order to see the point of the pen as it moved over the rough paper. Her hands were folded before her, but the uppermost one twitched and moved once or twice, as though it would go out to get possession of the precious document which left her all the heiress's great possessions in case of Donna Veronica's death. It was a bit of paper well worth having.

The girl rose, slight and graceful, when she had written her name, and the finely chiselled lips had

an upward curve of young scorn, as she turned from the table, while the notary and his clerk proceeded to witness the will. Immediately, the countess smiled, very brightly, showing beautiful teeth between smooth red lips, and her strong arms went round her young niece. She was a woman at least forty years of age, but still handsome.

"I thank you with all my heart!" she cried. "It is a proof of affection which I shall never forget! You will live a hundred years — a thousand, if God will it! But the mere wish to leave me your fortune is a token of love and esteem which I shall know how to value."

Donna Veronica kissed her aunt's fresh cheek coldly, and drew back as soon as she could.

"I am glad that you are pleased," she answered in a cool and colourless voice.

She felt that she had said enough, and, so far as she expected any thanks, her aunt had said too much. She had made the will and had signed it, for the sake of peace, and she asked nothing but peace in return. Ever since she had left the convent in which she had been educated and had come to live with her aunt, the question of this will had arisen at least once every day, and she knew by heart every argument which had been invented to induce her to make it. The principal one had always been the same. She had been told that if, in the inscrutable ways of Providence, she should

chance to die young, unmarried and childless, the whole of the great Acireale property would go to relations whom she had never seen and of whom she scarcely knew the names. This, the Countess Macomer had insisted, would be a terrible misfortune, and as human life was uncertain, even when one was very young, it was the duty of Veronica to provide against it, by leaving everything to the one remaining member of the Serra family who, with herself, represented the direct line, who had taken a mother's place and duties in bringing up the orphan girl, and who had been ready to sacrifice every personal consideration for the sake of the child's welfare.

Veronica did not see clearly that the Countess Macomer had ever really sacrificed anything at all in the execution of her trust as guardian, any more than the count himself, who, with Cardinal Campodonico, was a joint trustee, had ever been put to any inconvenience, beyond that of being the uncle by marriage of one of the richest heiresses in Italy. It was natural that when she had signed the will at last, she should receive her aunt's effusive thanks rather coldly, and that she should show very little enthusiasm when her uncle kissed her forehead and expressed his appreciation of her loving intention. The plain truth was that if she had refused any longer to sign the will, the two would have made her life even more unbearable than it was already.

She knew that there was no reason why her life should be made hard to bear. She was not only rich, and a princess in her own right. She was young and, if not pretty, at least fairly well endowed with those gifts which attract and please, and bring their possessor the daily little satisfactions that make something very like happiness, before passion throws its load into the scales of life on the right side or the wrong. She knew that, at her age, she might have been married already, and she wondered that her aunt should not have proposed to marry her before now. Yet in this she was not displeased, for her best friend, Bianca Campodonico, had been married two years already to Corleone, of evil fame, and was desperately unhappy. Veronica dreaded a like fate, and was in no haste to find a husband. The countess told her always that she should be free to choose one for herself within reasonable limits of age, name, and fortune. Such an heiress, with such a fortune, said Matilde Macomer, could marry whom she pleased. But so far as Veronica had been allowed to see the world, the choice seemed anything but large.

The count and countess had always been very careful in the selection of their intimate associates — they could hardly be said to have any intimate friends. Since Veronica had come to them from the convent in Rome, where she had been educated

according to her dead father's desire, they had been doubly cautious and trebly particular as to the persons they chose to receive. Their responsibility, they said openly, was very great. The child's happiness was wholly in their hands. They would be held accountable if she should form an unfortunate attachment for some ineligible young man who might chance to dine at their table. The responsibility, they repeated with emphasis, was truly enormous. It was also an unfortunate fact that in their Neapolitan society there were many young men, princes and dukes by the score, who had nothing but their names and titles to recommend them, and who would have found it very hard to keep body and title together, so to say, if gambling had suddenly been abolished, or had gone out of fashion unexpectedly.

Then, too, the Macomer couple had always led a retired life and had kept aloof from the very gay portion of society. They lived well, according to their station, and so far as any one could see; but it had always been said that Gregorio Macomer was miserly. At the same time it suited his wife, for reasons of her own, not to be conspicuous in the world, and she encouraged him to lead a quiet existence, spending half the year in the country, and receiving very few people when in Naples during the winter and spring. Gregorio had one brother, Bosio, considerably younger than himself

and very different in character, who was not married and who lived at the Palazzo Macomer, on excellent terms both with Gregorio and the countess, as well as with Veronica herself. The young girl was inclined to like him, though she felt dimly that she could never understand him as she believed that she understood her aunt and uncle. He was, indeed, almost the only man, excepting her uncle, whom she could be said to know tolerably well. He was not present on that afternoon when she signed the will, but his absence did not surprise her, for he had always abstained from any remarks about her property or his brother's and sister-in-law's guardianship, in such a marked way as to make her understand that he really wished to know nothing about the management or disposal of her fortune.

She liked him for several reasons,— for his non-interference in discussions about her affairs, for a certain quiet consideration, just a shade more friendly than deference, which he showed for her slightest wishes, and chiefly, perhaps, for his conversation and perfectly even temper.

Her uncle Macomer was not always good-tempered and he was never considerate. He was a stiff man, of impenetrable face, much older than his wife, cold when he was pleased, and harsh as rough ice when he was annoyed; a tall, bony man, with flattened lips, from which the grey moustaches and the beard

were brushed smoothly away in all directions. He had very small eyes — a witty enemy of his said they were so small that one could not find them in his face, and those who knew him laughed at the jest, for they always seemed hard to find when one wished to meet them. His shoulders were unusually high and narrow, but he did not stoop. On the contrary, he habitually threw back his head, with a certain coldly aggressive stiffness, so that he easily looked above the person with whom he was talking. Though he had never been given to any sort of bodily exercise, his hands were naturally horny, and they were almost always cold. For the rest, he was careful of his appearance and scrupulous in matters of dress, like many of his fellow-countrymen. In his household he insisted upon a neatness as fastidious as his own, and nothing could have induced him to employ a Neapolitan servant. His family colours were green and black, and the green of his servants' liveries was of the very darkest that could be had.

He imposed his taste upon his household, and gave it a certain marked respectability which betrayed no information about his fortune. To all appearances he was not poor; but it would have been impossible to say with certainty whether he were rich or only in moderate circumstances. He was undoubtedly more careful than ninety-nine out of a hundred of his fellow-citizens, in getting

the value of what he spent, to the uttermost splitting of farthings; and when he spoke of money there was a certain cruel hardening of the hard lines in his face, which Veronica never failed to notice with dislike. She wondered how her aunt could have led an apparently tranquil life with such a man during more than twenty years.

Doubtless, she thought, Bosio's presence acted as a palliative in the somewhat grim atmosphere of the Palazzo Macomer. He was utterly different from his brother. In the first place, he was gentle and kind in speech and manner, though apparently rather sad than gay. He was different in face, in figure, in voice, in carriage — having quiet brown eyes, and brown hair only streaked with grey, with a full, silky beard; a clear pale complexion; in frame shorter than Gregorio, with smaller bones, slightly inclined to stoutness, but rather graceful than stiff; small feet and well-shaped hands of pleasant texture; a clear, low voice that never jarred upon the ear, and a kindly, half-sad laugh in which there was a singular refinement, of the sort which shows itself more in laughter than in speech. Laughter is, indeed, a terrible betrayer of the character, and a surer guide in judgment than most people know. For men learn to use their voices skilfully and to govern their tones as well as their words; but, beyond not laughing too loud for ordinary decency of behaviour, there are few

people who care, or realize, how they laugh; and those who do, and who, being aware that there is room for improvement, endeavour to improve, very generally produce either a semi-musical noise, which is false and affected, or a perfectly inane cachinnation which has nothing human in it at all.

Bosio Macomer was a refined man, not only by education and outward contact with the refinements he sought in others, but within himself and by predisposition of nature. He read much, and found beauties in books which his friends thought dull, but which appealed tenderly to his innate love of tenderness. He had probably lost many illusions, but the sweetest of them all was still fresh in him, for he loved nature unaffectedly. In an unobtrusive way he was something of an artist, and was fond of going out by himself, when in the country, to sketch and dream all day. Veronica did not understand how with such tastes he could bear the life in the Palazzo Macomer, for months at a time. He was free to go and come as he pleased, and since he preferred the country, she wondered why he did not live out of town altogether. His existence was the more incomprehensible to her, as he rarely lost an opportunity of finding fault with Naples as a city and with the Neapolitans as human beings. Sometimes he did not leave the house for many days, as he frankly admitted, preferring the little apartment in the upper story of the house,

where he lived independently, with one old servant, amongst his books and his pictures, appearing downstairs only at dinner, and not always then. His place was always ready for him, but no one ever remarked his absence, nor inquired where he might be when he chose to stay away.

He was on excellent terms with every one. The servants adored him, while they feared his brother and disliked the countess; when he appeared he never failed to kiss the countess's hand, and to exchange a friendly word or two with Gregorio; but as for the latter, Bosio made no secret of the fact that he preferred the society of the ladies of the household to that of the count, with whom he had little in common. He certainly admired his sister-in-law, and more than once frankly confessed to Veronica that in his opinion Matilde Macomer was still the most beautiful woman in the world. Yet Veronica had observed that he was critical of looks in other women, and she thought his criticisms generally just and in good taste. For her part, however, if he chose to consider her middle-aged aunt lovely, Veronica would not contradict him, for she was cautious in a certain degree, and in spite of herself she distrusted her surroundings.

There were times when the Countess Macomer inspired her with confidence. Those very beautiful dark eyes of hers had but one defect, namely, that they were quite too near together; but they

were still the best features in the elder woman's face, and when Veronica looked at them from such an angle as not to notice their relative position, she almost believed that she could trust them. But she never liked the smooth red lips, nor the over-pointed nose, which had something of the falcon's keenness without its nobility. The thick and waving brown hair grew almost too low on the white forehead, and, whether by art or nature, the eyebrows were too broad and too dark for the face, though they were so well placed as to greatly improve the defect of the close-set eyes. There was a marvellous genuine freshness of colour in the clear complexion, and the woman carried her head well upon a really magnificent neck. She was strong and vital and healthy, and her personality was as distinctly dominating as her physical self. Yet she was generally very careful not to displease her husband, even when he was capricious, and Veronica was sometimes surprised by the apparent weakness with which she yielded to him in matters about which she had as good a right as he to an opinion and a decision. The girl supposed that her aunt was not so strong as she seemed to be, when actually brought face to face with the rough ice of Gregorio Macomer's character.

Veronica made her observations discreetly and kept them to herself, as was not only becoming but wise. At first the change from the semi-cloistered

existence of the convent in Rome to the life at the Palazzo Macomer had dazzled the girl and had confused her ideas. But with the natural desire of the very young to seem experienced, she had begun by manifesting no surprise at anything she saw; and she had soon discovered that, although she was supposed to be living in the society of the most idle and pleasure-loving city in the world, her surroundings were in reality neither gay nor dazzling, but decidedly monotonous and dull. She had dim, childish memories of magnificent things in her father's house, though the main impression was that of his death, following closely, as she had been told, upon her mother's. Of the latter, she could remember nothing. In dreams she saw beautiful things, and brilliant light and splendid pictures and enchanted gardens, and when she awoke she felt that the dreams had been recollections of what she had seen, and of what still belonged to her. But she sought the reality in vain. The grand old palace in the Toledo was hers, she was told, but it was let for a term of years to the municipality and was filled with public offices; the marble staircases were black and dingy with the passing of many feet that tracked in the mud in winter and the filthy dust of Naples in summer. Dark, poor faces and ill-clad forms moved through the halls, and horrible voices echoed perpetually in the corridors, where those who waited discussed

taxes, and wrangled, and cursed those in power, and cheated one another, and picked a pocket now and then, and spat upon the marble pavement whereon royal and lordly feet had so often trod in days gone by. It had all become a great nest of dirt and stealing and busy chicanery, where dingy, hawk-eyed men with sodden white faces and disgusting hands lay in wait for the unwary who had business with the city government, to rob them on pretence of facilitating their affairs, to cringe for a little coin flung them in scorn sometimes by one who had grown rich in greater robbery than they could practise — sometimes, too, springing aside to escape a kick or a blow as ill-tempered success went swinging by, high-handed and vulgarly cruel, a few degrees less filthy and ten thousand times more repulsive.

Once, Veronica had insisted upon going through the palace. She would never enter it again, and after that day, when she passed it, she turned her face from it and looked away. Vaguely, she wondered whether they were not deceiving her and whether it were really the home she dimly remembered. There had been splendid things in it, then — she would not ask what had become of them, but without asking, she was told that they had been wisely disposed of, and that instead of paying people for keeping an uninhabited palace in order, she was receiving an enormous rent for it from the city.

Then she had wished to see the lovely villa that came back in the pictures of her dreams, and she had been driven out into the country according to her desire. From a distance, as the carriage approached it, she recognized the lordly poplars, and far at the end of the avenue the elaborately stuccoed front and cornices of the old-fashioned "barocco" building. But the gardens were gone. Files of neatly trimmed vines, trained upon poles stuck in deep furrows, stretched away from the avenue on either side. The flower garden was a vegetable garden now, and the artichokes and the cabbages and the broccoli were planted with mathematical regularity up to the very walls. There were hens and chickens on the steps and running in and out of the open door, and from a near sty the grunt of many pigs reached her ears. A pale, earthy-skinned peasant, scantily clad in dusty canvas, grinned sadly and kissed the hem of her skirt, calling her 'Excellency' and beginning at once to beg for reduction of rent. A field-worn woman, filthy and dishevelled, drove back half a dozen nearly naked children whose little legs were crusted with dry mud, and whose faces had not been washed for a long time.

And within, there was no furniture. In the rooms upstairs were stores of grain and potatoes, and red peppers and grapes hanging on strings. The cracked mirrors, built into the gilded stucco,

were coated with heavy unctuous dust, and the fine old painted tiles on the floor were loose and broken in places. In the ceiling certain pink and well-fed cherubs still supported unnatural thunder-clouds through which Juno forever drove her gold-wheeled car and team of patient peacocks, smiling high and goddess-like at the squalor beneath. Still Diana bent over Endymion cruelly foreshortened in his sleep, beyond the possibility of a waking return to human proportions. Mars frowned, Jove threatened, Venus rose glowing from the sea; and below, the unctuous black dust settled and thickened on everything except the cracked floors piled with maize and beans and lupins, and rubbed bright between the heaps by the peasants' naked feet.

Veronica turned her back upon the villa, as she had turned from the great palace in the Toledo. They whispered to her that the peasant's rent must not be reduced, for he was well able to pay, and they pointed to the closely planted vines and vegetables and olives that stretched far away to right and left, where she remembered in her dreams of far childhood that there had been lawns and walks and flowers. The man, she was told, was not the only peasant on the place. There were other houses now, and huts that could shelter a family, and there was land, land, always more land, as far as she could see, all as closely and neatly

and regularly planted with vegetables and grain, vines and olives; and it was all hers, and yielded enormous rents which were wisely invested. She was very rich indeed, but to her it all seemed horribly sordid and grinding and mean — and the peasants looked prematurely old, labour-worn, filthy, wretchedly poor. If she had even had any satisfaction from so much wealth, it might have seemed different. She said so, in her heart. She was accustomed to tell her confessor that she was proud and uncharitable and unfeeling — not finding any real misdeeds to confess. She was willing to believe that she was all that and much more. If she had been living in the whirling, golden pleasure-storm of an utterly thoughtless world, she believed herself bad enough to have shut her memory's eyes to the haggard peasant-mother of the dirty half-clad children — to all the hundreds of them who doubtless lived just like the one she had seen, all upon her lands; she could have forgotten the busy-thieving, sodden-faced crowd that thronged the chambers wherein her fathers had been born and had feasted kings and had died — the very room where her own father had lain dead. She could have shut it all out, she thought, if she had held in her hands the gold that all this brought, to scatter it at her will; for she was sure that she had not a better heart than other girls of her age. But she had never seen it. The reality of her own

life was too weak and colourless, by contrast, to make the name of fortune an excuse for the sordid facts of meanness. There was no splendour about her, no wild gaiety, none of the glorious extravagance of conscious young wealth, and there was very little amusement to divert her thoughts. The people she would have liked to know were kept at a distance from her. She was advised not to buy the things which attracted her eyes, and was told that they were not so good as they looked, and that on the whole it was better to keep money than to spend it — but that, of course, she might do as she pleased, and that when she wanted money her uncle Macomer would give it to her.

It all passed through his hands, and he managed everything, with the assistance of Lamberto Squarci the notary and of other men of business — mostly shabby-looking men in black, with spectacles and unhealthy complexions, who came and went in the morning when old Macomer was in his study attending to affairs. Veronica knew none but Squarci by name, and never spoke with any of them. There seemed to be no reason why she should.

The count had told her that when she wished it, he was ready to render an account of the estates and would be happy to explain everything to her at length. She understood nothing of business and was content to accept the roughest statement as he

chose to give it to her. She was far too young to distrust the man whom she had been taught to respect as her guardian and as a person of scrupulous honesty. She was completely in his power, and she was accustomed to ask him for any little sums she needed. It never really struck her that he might misuse the authority she indifferently left in his hands.

It was her aunt who had induced her to make the will, and for whose conduct she felt a sort of undefined resentment and contempt. Considering, she thought, how improbable it was that she herself should die before Matilde Macomer, the latter had shown an absurd anxiety about the disposal of the fortune. If Veronica had yielded the point, she had done so in order to get rid of an importunity which wearied her perpetually. She was to marry, of course, in due time. God would give her children, and they would inherit her wealth. It was really ridiculous of her aunt to be so anxious lest it should all go to those distant relations in Sicily and Spain. Nevertheless, in order to have peace, she signed the will, and her aunt thanked her effusively, and old Macomer's flat lips touched her forehead while he spoke a few words of gratified approval.

In the evening she told Bosio, the count's brother, of what she had done. His gentle eyes looked at her thoughtfully for a few seconds, and

he did not smile, nor did he make any observation.

A few minutes later he was talking of a picture he had seen for sale — a mere sketch, but by Ribera, called the Spagnoletto. She made up her mind to buy it for him as a surprise, for it pleased her to give him pleasure.

But when she was alone in her room that night she recalled Bosio's expression when she had told him about the will. She was sure that he was not pleased, and she wondered why he had not at least said something in reply — something quite indifferent perhaps, but yet something, instead of looking at her in total silence, just for those few seconds. After all, she was really more intimate with him than with her aunt and uncle, and liked him better than either of them, so that she had a right to expect that he should have answered with something more than silence when she told him of such a matter.

She sat a long time in a deep chair near her toilet table, thinking about her own life, in the great dim room which half a dozen candles barely lighted; and perhaps it was the first time that she had really asked herself how long her present mode of existence was to continue, how long she was to lie half-hidden, as it were, in the sombrely respectable dimness of the Macomer establishment, how long she was to remain unmarried. Knowing the cus-

toms of her own people in regard to marriage, as she did, it was certainly strange that she should not have heard of any offer made to her uncle and aunt for her hand. Surely the mothers of marriageable sons knew of her existence, of her fortune, of the titles she held in her own right and could confer upon her husband and leave to her children. It was not natural that no one should wish to marry her, that no mother should desire such an heiress for her son.

With the distrustful introspection of maiden youth, she suddenly asked herself whether by any possibility she were different from other girls and whether she had not some strange defect, physical or mental, of which the existence had been most carefully concealed from her all her life. In the quick impulse she rose and brought all the burning candles to the toilet table, and lighted others, and stood before the mirror, in the yellow light, gazing most critically at her own reflexion. She looked long and earnestly and quite without vanity. She told herself, cataloguing her looks, that her hair was neither black nor brown, but that it was very thick and long and waved naturally; that her eyes were very dark, with queer little angles just above the lids, under the prominent brows; that her nose, seen in full face, looked very straight and rather small, though she had been told by the girls in the convent that it was aquiline and pointed;

that her cheeks were thin and almost colourless; that her chin was round and smooth and prominent, her lips rather dark than red, and modelled in a high curve; that her ears were very small — she threw back the heavy hair to see them better, turning her face sideways to the glass; that her throat was over-slender, and her neck and arms far too thin for beauty, but with a young leanness which might improve with time, though nothing could ever make them white. She was dark, on the whole. She was willing to admit that she was sallow, that her eyes had a rather sad look in them, and even that one was almost imperceptibly larger than the other, though the difference was so small that she had never noticed it before, and it might be due to the uncertain light of the candles in the dim room. But most assuredly there was no physical defect to be seen. She was not beautiful like poor Bianca Corleone; but she was far from ugly — that was certain.

And in mind — she laughed as she looked at herself in the glass. Bosio Macomer told her that she was clever, and he certainly knew. But her own expression pleased her when she laughed, and she laughed again with pleasure, and watched herself in a sort of girlish and innocent satisfaction. Then her eyes met their own reflexion, and she grew suddenly grave again, and something in them told her that they were not laughing with her lips, and might not often look upon things mirthful.

But she was not stupid, and she was not ugly. She had assured herself of that. The worst that could be said was that she was a very thin girl and that her complexion was not brilliant, though it was healthy enough, and clear. No — there was certainly no reason why her aunt should not have received offers of marriage for her, and many people would have thought it strange that she should be still unmarried — with her looks, her name, and that great fortune of which Gregorio Macomer was taking such good care.

CHAPTER II.

On that same night, when Veronica had gone to her room, Bosio Macomer remained alone with the countess in the small drawing-room in which the family generally spent the evening. Gregorio was presumably in his study, busy with his perpetual accounts or otherwise occupied. He very often spent the hours between dinner and bedtime by himself, leaving his brother to keep his wife company if Veronica chose to retire early.

The room was small and the first impression of colour which it gave was that of a strong, deep yellow. There was yellow damask on the walls, the curtains were of an old sort of silk material in stripes of yellow and chocolate, and most of the furniture was covered with yellow satin. The whole was in the style of the early part of this century, modified by the bad taste of the Second Empire, with much gilded carving about the doors and the corners of the big panels in which the damask was stretched, while the low, vaulted ceiling was a mass of gilt stucco, modelled in heavy acanthus leaves and arabesques, from the centre of which hung a chandelier of white Venetian glass. There were no pictures on the walls, and

there were no flowers nor plants in pots, to relieve the strong colour which filled the eye. Nevertheless the room had the air of being inhabited, and was less glaring and stiff and old-fashioned than it might seem from this description. There were a good many books on the tables, chiefly French novels, as yellow as the hangings; and there were writing materials and a couple of newspapers and two or three open notes. A small wood fire burned in a deep, low fireplace adorned with marble and gilt brass.

Matilde Macomer sat, leaning back, upon a little sofa which stood across a corner of the room far from the fire. One hand lay idly in her lap, the other, as she stretched out her arm, lay upon the back of the sofa, and her head with its thick, brown hair was bent down. She had fixed her eyes upon a point of the carpet and had not moved from her position for a long time. The folds of her black gown made graceful lines from her knees to her feet, and her imposing figure was thrown into strong relief against the yellow background as she leaned to the corner, one foot just touching the floor.

Bosio sat at a distance from her, on a low chair, his elbows on his knees, staring at the fire. Neither had spoken for several minutes. Matilde broke the silence first, her eyes still fixed on the carpet.

"You must marry Veronica," she said slowly; "nothing else can save us."

It was clear that the idea was not new to Bosio, for he showed no surprise. But he turned deliberately and looked at the countess before he answered her. There were unusual lines in his quiet face — lines of great distress and perplexity.

"It is a crime," he said in a low voice.

Matilda raised her eyes, with an almost imperceptible movement of the shoulders.

"Murder is a crime," she answered simply. Then Bosio started violently and turned very white, almost rising from his seat.

"Murder?" he cried; "what do you mean?"

Matilde's smooth red lips smiled.

"I merely mentioned it as an instance of a crime," she said, without any change of tone. "You said it would be a crime for you to marry Veronica. It did not strike me that it could be called by that name. Crimes are murder, stealing, forgery — such things. Who would say that it was criminal for Bosio Macomer to marry Veronica Serra? There is no reason against it. I daresay that many people wonder why you have not married her already, and that many others suppose that you will before long. You are young, you have never been married, you have a very good name and a small fortune of your own."

"Take it, then!" exclaimed Bosio, impulsively.

"You shall have it all to-morrow — everything I possess. God knows, I am ready to give you all I have. Take it. I can live somehow. What do I care? I have given you my life — what is a little money? But do not ask me to marry her, your niece, here, under your very roof. I am not a saint, but I cannot do that!"

"No," answered the countess, "we are not saints, you and I, it is true. For my part, I make no pretences. But the trouble is desperate, Bosio. I do not know what to do. It is desperate!" she repeated with sudden energy. "Desperate, I tell you!"

"I suppose that all I have would be of no use, then?" asked Bosio, disheartened.

"It would pay the interest for a few months longer. That would be all. Then we should be where we are now, or shall be in three weeks."

"Throw yourself upon her mercy. Ask her to forgive you and to lend you money," suggested Bosio. "She is kind — she will do it, when she knows the truth."

"I had thought of that," answered Matilde. "But, in the first place, you do not know her. Secondly, you forget Cardinal Campodonico."

"Since he has left the management of her fortune in Gregorio's hands, he will not begin to ask questions at this point. Besides, the guardianship is at an end —"

"The estate has not been made over. He will insist upon seeing the accounts — that is no matter, for they will bear his inspection well enough. Squarci is clever! But Veronica sees him. She would tell him of our trouble, if we went to her. If not, she would certainly tell Bianca Corleone, who is his niece. If he suspected anything, let alone knowing the truth, that would be the end of everything. It would be better for us to escape before the crash — if we could. It comes to that — unless you will help us."

"By marrying Veronica?" asked Bosio, with a bitterness not natural to him.

"I see no other way. The cardinal could see the accounts. You could be married, and the fortune could be made over to you. She would never know, nor ask questions. You could set our affairs straight, and still be the richest man in Naples or Sicily. It would all be over. It would be peace — at last, at last!" she repeated, with a sudden change of tone that ended in a deep-drawn sigh of anticipated relief. "You do not know half there is to tell," she continued, speaking rapidly after a moment's pause. "We are ruined, and worse than ruined. We have been, for years. Gregorio got himself into that horrible speculation years and years ago, though I knew nothing about it. While Veronica was a minor, he helped himself, as he could — with her money. It was easy, for

he controlled everything. But now he can do nothing without her signature. Squarci said so last week. He cannot sell a bit of land, a stick of timber, anything, without her name. And we are ruined, Bosio. This house is mortgaged, and the mortgage expires on the first of January, in three weeks. We have nothing left — nothing but the hope of Veronica's charity — or the hope that you will marry her and save us from starvation and disgrace. I got her to sign the will. There was —"

The countess checked herself and stopped short, turning an emerald ring which she wore. She was pale.

"There was what?" asked Bosio, in an unsteady tone.

"There was just the bare possibility that she might die before January," said Matilde, almost in a whisper. "People die young sometimes, you know — very young. It pleases Providence to do strange things. Of course it would be most dreadful, if she were to die, would it not? It would be lonely in the house, without her. It seems to me that I should see her at night, in the dark corners, when I should be alone. Ugh!"

Matilde Macomer shivered suddenly, and then stared at Bosio with frightened eyes. He glanced at her nervously.

"I am afraid of you," he said.

"Of me?" Her presence of mind returned. "What an idea! just because I suggested that poor little Veronica might catch a cold or a fever in this horrible weather and might die of the one or the other? And just because I am fond of her, and said that I should be afraid of seeing her in the dark! Heaven give her a hundred years of life! Why should we talk of such sad things?"

"It is certainly not I who wish to talk of them, or think of them," answered Bosio, thoughtfully, and turning once more to the fire. "You are overwrought, Matilde — you are unhappy, afraid of the future — what shall I say? Sometimes you speak in a strange way."

"Is it any wonder? The case is desperate, and I am desperate, too —"

"Do not say it —"

"Then say that you will marry Veronica, and save us all, and bring peace into the house — for my sake, Bosio — for me!"

She leaned forward, and her hands met upon her knee in something like a gesture of supplication, while she sought his eyes.

"For your sake," repeated Bosio, dreamily. "For your sake? But you ask the impossible, Matilde. Besides, she would not marry me. She would laugh at the idea. And then — for you and me — it is horrible! You have no right to ask it."

"No right? Ah, Bosio! Have I not the right to ask anything of you, after all these years?"

"Anything — but not that! Your niece — under your roof! No — no — no! I cannot, even if she would consent."

"Not even — " Matilda's splendid eyes, so cruelly close together, fastened themselves upon the weak man's face, and she frowned.

"Not even if you thought it would be much better for her?" she asked very slowly, completing the sentence.

Again he started and shrank from her.

"Just God!" he exclaimed under his breath. "That a woman should have such thoughts!" Then he turned upon her with an instinctive revival of manhood and honour. "You shall not hurt her!" he cried, as fiercely as his voice could speak. "You shall not hurt a hair of her head, not even to save yourself! I will warn her — I will have her protected — I will tell everything! What is my life worth?"

"You would merely be told that you were mad, and we should have you taken out to the asylum at Aversa — as mad as I am, or soon shall be, if this goes on! You are mad to believe that I could do such things — I, a woman! And yet, I know I say words that have no reason in them! And I think crimes — horrible crimes, when I am alone — and I can tell no one but you. Have pity on me, Bosio! I was not always what I am now — "

She spoke incoherently, and her steadiness broke down all at once, for she had been living long under a fearful strain of terror and anxiety. The consciousness that she could say with safety whatever came first to her lips helped to weaken her. She half expected that Bosio would rise, and come to her and comfort her, perhaps, as she hid her face in her hands, shivering in fear of herself and shaking a little with the convulsive sob that was so near.

But Bosio did not move from his seat. He sat quite still, staring at the fire. He was not a physical coward, but, morally speaking, he was terrified and stunned by what he had understood her to say. Probably no man of any great strength of character, however bad, could have lived the life he had led in that house for many years, dominated by such a woman as Matilde Macomer. And now his weakness showed itself, to himself and to her, in what he felt, and in what he did, respectively. A strong man, having once felt that revival of manly instinct, would have turned upon her and terrified her and mastered her; and, within himself, his heart might have broken because he had ever loved such a woman. But Bosio sat still in his seat and said nothing more, though his brow was moist with a creeping, painful, trembling emotion that twisted his heart and tore his delicate nerves. He felt that his hands were very

cold, but that he could not speak. She dominated him still, and he was ashamed of the weakness, and of his own desire to go and comfort her and forget the things she had said.

If he had spoken to her, she would have burst into tears; but his silence betrayed that he had no strength, and she suddenly felt that she was strong again, and that there was hope, and that he might marry Veronica, after all. A woman rarely breaks down to very tears before a man weaker than herself, though she may be near it.

"You must marry her," said Matilde, with returning steadiness. "You owe it to your brother and to me. Should I say, 'to me,' first? It is to save us from disgrace — from being prosecuted as well as ruined, from being dragged into court to answer for having wilfully defrauded — that is the word they would use! — for having wilfully defrauded Veronica Serra of a great deal of money, when we were her guardians and responsible for everything she had. My hands are clean of that — your brother did it without my knowledge. But no judge living would believe that I, being a guardian with my husband, could be so wholly ignorant of his affairs. There are severe penalties for such things, Bosio — I believe that we should both be sent to penal servitude; for no power on earth could save us from a conviction, any more than anything but Veronica's money can save us from ruin now.

Gregorio has taken much, but it has been nothing compared with the whole fortune. If you marry her, she will never know — no one will know — no one will ever guess. As her husband you will have control of everything, and no one then will blame you for taking a hundredth part of your wife's money to save your brother. You will have the right to do it. Your hands will be clean, too, as they are to-day. What is the crime? What is the difficulty? What is the objection? And on the other side there is ruin, a public trial, a conviction and penal servitude for your own brother, Gregorio, Count Macomer, and Matilde Serra, his wife."

"My God! What a choice!" exclaimed Bosio, pressing both his cold hands to his wet forehead.

"There is no choice!" answered the woman, with low, quick emphasis. "Your mind is made up, and we will announce the engagement at once. I do not care what objection Veronica makes. She likes you, she is half in love with you — what other man does she know? And if she did — she would not repent of marrying you rather than any one else. You will make her happy — as for me, I shall at least not die a disgraced woman. You talk of choice! Mine would be between a few drops of morphia and the galleys, — a thousand times more desperate than yours, it seems to me!"

Her large eyes flashed with the furious determination to make him do what she desired. His hands had fallen from his face, and he was looking at her almost quietly, not yielding so much as she thought, but at least listening gravely instead of telling her that she asked the impossible.

The door opened discreetly, and a servant appeared upon the threshold.

"The Signor Duca della Spina begs your Excellency to receive him for a moment, if it is not too late."

"Certainly," answered the countess, instantly, and with perfect self-control.

The servant closed the door and went back to deliver the short message. Matilde threw the folds of her black gown away from her feet, so that she might rise to meet the visitor, who was an old man and a person of importance. She looked keenly at Bosio.

"Do not go away," she said quickly, in a low voice. "Your forehead is wet — dry it — compose yourself — be natural!"

Before Bosio had returned his handkerchief to his pocket the door opened again, and a tall old man entered with a stooping gait. He had weak and inquiring eyes that looked about the room as he walked. His head was bald, and shone like a skull in the yellow reflexion from the damask hangings. His gait was not firm, and as he passed Bosio

in order to reach the countess, he had an uncertain movement of head and hand, as though he were inclined to speak to him first. Matilde had risen, however, and had moved a step forward to meet the visitor, speaking at the same time, as though to direct him to herself, with the somewhat maternal air which even young women sometimes assume in greeting old men.

The Duca della Spina smiled rather feebly as he took the outstretched hand, and slowly sat down upon the sofa beside Matilde.

"I feared it might be too late," he began, and his watery blue eyes sought her face anxiously. "But my son insisted that I should come this evening, when he found that I had not been able to see you this afternoon."

"How is he?" asked the countess, suddenly assuming an expression of great concern.

"Eh! How he is! He is — so," answered the Duca, with a gesture which meant uncertainty. "Signora Contessa," he added, "he is not well at all. It is natural with the young. It is passion. What else can I tell you? He is impatient. His nerves shake him, and he does not eat. Morning and evening he asks, 'Father, what will it be?' So, to content him, I have come to disturb you."

"Not in the least, dear Duca!"

The door opened again, and Gregorio Macomer entered the room, having been informed of the pres-

ence of a visitor. The Duca looked up, and his head shook involuntarily, as he at once began the slow process of getting upon his legs. But Macomer was already pressing him into his seat again, holding the old hand in both of his with an appearance of much cordiality.

"I hope that Gianluca is no worse?" he said, with an interrogation that expressed friendly interest.

"Better he is not," answered the Duca, sadly. "What would you? It is passion. That is why I have come at this hour, and I have made my excuses to the Signora Contessa for disturbing her."

"Excuses?" cried Gregorio, promptly. "We are delighted to see you, dear friend!"

But as he spoke he turned a look of inquiry upon his wife, and she answered by a scarcely perceptible sign of negation.

They had been taken by surprise, for they had not expected the Duca's visit. Not heeding them, his heart full of his son, the old man continued to speak, in short, almost tremulous sentences.

"It is certain that Gianluca is very ill," he said. "Taquisara has been with him to-day, and Pietro Ghisleri — but Taquisara is his best friend. You know Taquisara, do you not?"

"A Sicilian?" asked the countess, encouraging the old man to go on.

"Yes," said Macomer, answering for the Duca, for he was proud of his genealogical knowledge.

"The only son of the old Baron of Guardia. But every one calls him Taquisara, though his father is dead. There is a story which says that they are descended from Tancred."

"It may be," said the old Duca. "There are so many legends — but he is Gianluca's best friend, and he comes to see him every day. The boy is ill — very ill." He shook his head, and bent it almost to his breast. "He wastes away, and I do not know what to do for him."

The Count and Countess Macomer also shook their heads gravely, but said nothing. Bosio, seated at a little distance, looked on, his brain still disturbed by what had gone before, and wondering at Matilde's power of seeming at her ease in such a desperate situation; wondering, too, at his brother's hard, cold face — the mask that had so well hidden the passion of the gambler, and perhaps many other passions as well, of which even Bosio knew nothing, nor cared to know anything, having secrets of his own to keep.

All at once, and without warning, after the short pause, the old man broke out in tremulous entreaty.

"Oh! my friends!" he cried. "Do not say no! I shall not have the courage to take such a message to my poor son! Eh, they say that nowadays old-fashioned love is not to be found. But look at Gianluca — he consumes himself, he wastes away before my eyes, and one day follows another, and I

can do nothing. You do not believe? Go and see! One day follows another — he is always in his room, consuming himself for love! He is pale — paler than a sheet. He does not eat, he does not drink, he does not smoke — he, who smoked thirty cigarettes a day! As for the theatre, or going out, he will not hear of it. He says, 'I will not see her, for if she will not have me, it is better to die quickly.' A father's heart, dear Macomer — think of what I suffer, and have compassion! He is my only one — such a beautiful boy, and so young —"

"We are sorry," said Matilde, with firm-voiced sympathy that was already a refusal.

"You will not!" cried the old man, shakily, in his distress. "Say you will not — but not that you are sorry! And Heaven knows it is not for Donna Veronica's money! The contract shall be as you please — we do not need —"

"Who has spoken of money?" The countess's tone expressed grave indifference to such a trifle. "Dear Duca, do not be distressed. We cannot help it. We cannot dictate to Providence. Had circumstances been different, what better match could we have found for her than your dear son? But I told you that the girl's inclinations must be consulted, and that we had little hope of satisfying you. And now —" She looked earnestly at her husband, as though to secure his consent beforehand — "and now it has turned out as we foresaw.

Courage, dear Duca! Your son is young. He has seen Veronica but a few times, and they have certainly never been alone together — what can it really be, such love-passion as that? Veronica has made her choice."

Not a muscle of Macomer's hard face moved. He knew that if his wife had a surprise for him on the spur of the moment, it must be for their joint interest. But the Duca della Spina's jaw dropped, and his hands shook.

"Yes," continued the countess, calmly, "Veronica has made her choice. It is hard for us to tell you, knowing how you feel for your son. Veronica is engaged to be married to Bosio, here."

Bosio started violently, for he was a very nervously organized man; but his brother's face did not change, though the small eyes suddenly flashed into sight brightly from beneath the drooping, concealing lids. A dead silence followed, which lasted several seconds. Matilde had laid her hand upon the Duca's arm, as though to give him courage, and she felt it tremble under her touch, for he loved his son very dearly.

"You might have written me this news," he said at last, in a low voice and with a dazed look. "You might — you might have spared me — oh, my son! My poor Gianluca!" His voice broke, and the weak, sincere tears broke from the watery eyes and trickled down the wasted cheeks piteously,

while his head turned slowly from side to side in sorrowfully hopeless regret.

"It has only been decided this evening," said Matilde. "We should have written to you in the morning."

"Of course," echoed her husband, gravely. "It was our duty to let you know at once."

The Duca della Spina rose painfully to his feet. He seemed quite unconscious of the tears he had shed, and too much shaken to take leave with any formality. Bosio stood quite still, when he had risen too, and his face was white. The old man passed him without a word, going to the door.

"My poor son! my poor Gianluca!" he repeated to himself, as Gregorio Macomer accompanied him.

Matilde and Bosio were left alone for a moment, but they knew that the count would return at once. They stood still, looking each at the other, with very different expressions.

Bosio felt that, in his place, a strong, brave man would have done something, would have stood up to deny the engagement, perhaps, or would have left the room rather than accept the situation in submissive silence, protesting in some way, though only Matilde should have understood the protest. She, on her side, slowly nodded her approval of his conduct, and in her dark eyes there was a yellow reflexion from the predominating colour of the room; there was triumph and satisfaction, and

there was the threat of the woman who dominates the man and is sure of doing with him as she pleases. Yet she was not so sure of herself as she seemed, and wished to seem, for she dreaded Bosio's sense of honour, which was not wholly dead.

"Do not deny it to Gregorio," she said, in a low tone, when she heard her husband's footstep returning through the room beyond.

Old Macomer came back and closed the door behind him.

"What is this?" he asked, at once; but though his voice was hard, it was trembling with the anticipation of a great victory. "Has Veronica consented?"

"No one has spoken to her," answered Bosio, before Matilde could speak.

"As though that mattered!" cried the countess, with contempt. "There is time for that!"

Gregorio's eyelids contracted with an expression of cunning.

"Oh!" he exclaimed thoughtfully, "I understand." He began to walk up and down in the narrow space between the furniture of the small sitting-room, bending his head between his high shoulders. "I see," he repeated. "I understand. But if Veronica refuses? You have been rash, Matilde."

"Veronica loves him," answered the countess. "And of course you know that he loves her," she

added, and her smooth lips smiled. "You need not deny it before us, Bosio. You have loved her ever since she came from the convent—"

"I?" Bosio's pale face reddened with anger.

"See how he blushes!" laughed Matilde. "As for Veronica, she will talk to no one else. They are made for each other. She will die if she does not marry Bosio soon."

The yellow reflexion danced in her eyes, as she fastened them upon her brother-in-law's face, and he shuddered, remembering what she had said before the Duca had come.

"If that is the case," said Macomer, "the sooner they are married, the better. Save her life, Bosio! Save her life! Do not let her die of love for you!"

He, who rarely laughed, laughed now, and the sound was horrible in his brother's ears. Then he suddenly turned away and left the room, still drily chuckling to himself. It was quite unconscious and an effect of his overwrought and long-controlled nerves.

Matilde and Bosio were alone again, and they knew that he would not come back. Bosio sank into his chair again, and pressed the palms of his hands to his eyes, resting his elbows on his knees.

"The infamy of it!" he groaned, in the bitterness of his weak misery.

Matilde stood beside him, and gently stroked

his hair where it was streaked with grey. He moved impatiently, as though to shake off her strong hand.

"No," she said, and her voice grew as soft as velvet. "It is to save me — to save us all."

He shook her off, and rose to his feet with spasmodic energy.

"I cannot — I will not — never!" he cried, walking away from her with irregular steps.

"But it will be so much better — for Veronica, too," she said softly, for she knew how to frighten him.

He turned with startled eyes. Then, with the impulse of a man escaping from something which he is not strong enough to face, he reached the door in two quick strides, and went out without looking back.

Matilde watched the door, as it closed, and stood still a few seconds before she left the room. Her eyes wandered to the clock, and she saw that it was nearly midnight.

The look of triumph faded slowly from her face, and the brows contracted in a look which no one could easily have understood, except Bosio himself, perhaps, had he still been there. The smooth lips were drawn in and tightly compressed; and she held her breath, while her right hand strained upon her left with all her might. Then the lips parted with a sort of little snap as she drew breath again;

and she turned her head suddenly, and looked behind her, growing a trifle paler, as though she expected to see something startling.

She tried to smile, and roused herself, rang the bell for the servant to put out the lights, and left the room. It was long before she slept that night. In the next room she could hear Gregorio's slow and regular footsteps, as he walked up and down without ceasing. In his own room upstairs, Bosio Macomer sat staring at the ashes of the burnt-out fire on his hearth. Only Veronica was asleep, dreamless, young, and restful.

CHAPTER III.

NAPLES, more than any other city of Italy, is full of the violent contrasts which belong to great old cities everywhere, and the absence of which makes new cities dull, be they as well built, as well situated, as civilized and as beautiful as they can be made by art handling nature for the greater glory of modern humanity.

In Naples, there is a fashionable new quarter, swept, watered, and garnished with plants and trees, but many of the great palaces stand in old and narrow streets, rising up, grim and solemn and proud, out of the recklessly vital life of one of the worst populaces in the world. Fifty paces away, again, is a wide thoroughfare, perhaps, raging and roaring with traffic from the port. A hundred yards in another direction, and there is a clean, deserted court, into which the midday sun pours itself as into a reservoir of light, — a court with a quiet church and simple old houses, through the doors of which pale-faced ecclesiastics silently come and go.

Round the next corner leads a dark lane, between hugely high buildings that press the air and keep

out the sun and all sky but a thin ribband of blue. And the air is heavy with all vile things, from the ill-washed linen that hangs, slowly drying, from the upper windows, thrust out into the draught with sticks, to the rotting garbage in the gutters below. The low-arched doors open directly upon the slimy, black pavement; and in the deep shadows within sit strange figures with doughy faces and glassy eyes, breathing in the stench of the nauseous, steamy air, — working a little, perhaps, at some one of the shadowy, back-street trades of a great city, but poisoned to death from birth by the air they live in, diseased of the diseased, from very childhood, and prolific as disease itself, multiplying to fatten death at the next pestilence.

And then, again, a vast square, gaudy with coloured handbills, noisy with wheels and the everlasting Neapolitan chattering of a thick-lipped, loud, degenerate dialect. There the little one-horse cabs tear hither and thither, drivers lashing their wretched beasts, wheels whirling, arms gesticulating, bad eyes flashing and leering, thick lips chattering everlastingly: and the tram-cars roll along, crowded till the people cling to one another on the steps; and the small boys dodge in and out between the cars and the carriages and the horses and the foot-passengers, some screaming out papers for sale, some looking for pockets to

pick, some hunting for stumps of cigars in the dust, — dirty, ragged, joyous, foul-mouthed, God-forsaken little boys; and then through the midst of all, as a black swan swimming stately through muddy waters, comes a splendid, princely equipage, all in mourning, from the black horses to the heavy veil just raised across a young widow's white face — and so, from contrast to contrast, through the dense city, and down to the teeming port, and out at last to the magic southern sea, where the clean life of the white-sailed ships passes silently, and scarce leaves a momentary wake to mar the pure waters of the tideless bay.

But there is life everywhere, — reckless, excessive, and the desire for life as a supreme good, worth living for its own sake — even if it is to be food for the next year's pestilence — a life that can support itself on anything, and thrive in its own fashion in the flashing sun, and the dust and the dirt, and multiply beyond measure and mysteriously fast. Only here and there in the swarm something permanent and fossilized stands solid and unchanging, and divides the flight of the myriad ephemeral lives — a monument, a church, a fortress, a palace: or, perhaps, the figure of some man of sterner race, with grave eyes and strong, thin lips, and manly carriage, looms in the crowd, and by its mere presence seems to send all the rest down a step to a lower level of humanity.

Such a man was Taquisara, the Sicilian, of whom the old Duca della Spina had spoken. He had no permanent abode in Naples, but lived in a hotel down by the public gardens, beyond Santa Lucia; and on the day after the Duca had been to see the Countess Macomer, he strolled up as usual, by short cuts and narrow streets, to see his friend Gianluca in the Spina palace, in the upper part of the city. Many people looked at him, as he went by, and some knew him for a Sicilian, by his face, while some took him for a foreigner, and pressed upon him to beg, or made faces and vile gestures at him, as soon as he could not see, after the manner of the lower Neapolitans. But he passed calmly on, supremely indifferent, his handsome, manly face turning neither to the right nor the left.

He might have stood for the portrait of a Saracen warrior of the eleventh century, with his high, dark features and keen eyes, his even lips, square jaw, and smooth, tough throat. He had, too, something of the Arabian dignity in his bearing, and he walked with long, well-balanced steps, swiftly, but without haste, as the Arab walks barefooted in the sand, not even suspecting that weariness can ever come upon him; erect, proud, without self-consciousness, elastic; collected and ever ready, in his easy and effortless movement, for sudden and violent action. He was not pale, as dark Italians are, but his skin had the colour and look of fresh light bronze, just

chiselled, and able to reflect the sun, while having a light of its own from the strong blood beneath. That was the reason why the Neapolitans who did not chance to have seen Sicilians often, took him for a foreigner and got into his way, holding out their hands to beg, and making ape-like grimaces at him behind his back. But those who knew the type of his race and recognized it, did nothing of that sort. On the contrary, they were careful not to molest him.

The friend whom he sought, high up in the city, in a luxurious, sunlit room overlooking the harbour and the wide bay, was as unlike him as one man could be unlike another — white, fair-haired, delicate, with soft blue eyes and silken lashes, and a passive hand that accepted the pressure of Taquisara's rather than returned it — the pale survival of another once conquering race.

Gianluca was evidently ill and weak, though few physicians could have defined the cause of his weakness. He moved easily enough when he rose to greet his friend, but there was a mortal languor about him, and an evident reluctance to move again when he had resumed his seat in the sun. He was muffled in a thickly wadded silk coat of a dark colour. His fair, straight hair was brushed away from his thin, bluish temples, and the golden young beard could not conceal the emaciation of his throat when his head leaned against the back of his easy-chair.

Taquisara sat down and looked at him, lighted a black cigar and looked again, got up, stirred the fire and then went to the window.

"You are worse to-day," he said, looking out. "What has happened?" He turned again, for the answer.

"It is all over," said Gianluca. "My father was there last night. She is betrothed to Bosio Macomer."

His voice sank low, and his head fell forward a little, so that his chin rested upon his folded hands. Taquisara uttered an exclamation of surprise, and bit the end of his cigar.

"She? To marry Bosio Macomer? No — no — I do not believe it."

"Ask my father," said Gianluca, without raising his eyes. "Bosio was there, in the room, when they told my father the news."

"No doubt," said Taquisara, beginning to walk up and down. "No doubt," he repeated. "But —" He lit his cigar instead of finishing the sentence, and his eyes were thoughtful.

"But — what?" asked his friend, dejectedly. "If it had not been true, they would not have said it. It is all over."

"Life, you mean? I doubt that. Nothing is over, for nothing is done. They are not married yet, are they?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then they may never marry."

"Who can prevent it? You? I? My father? It is over, I tell you. There is no hope. I will see her once more, and then I shall die. But I must see her once more. You must help me to see her."

"Of course," answered Taquisara. "But what strange people you are!" he exclaimed, after a moment's pause. "Who can understand you? You are dying for love of her. That is curious, in the first place. I understand killing for love, but not dying oneself, just by folding one's hands and looking at the stars and repeating her name. Then, you do nothing. You do not say, 'She shall not marry Macomer, because I, I who speak, will prevent it, and get her for myself.' No. Because some one has said that she will marry him, you feel sure that she will, and that ends the question. For the word of a man or a woman, all is to be finished. You are all contemplation, no action — all heart, no hands — all love, no anger! You deserve to die for love. I am sorry that I like you."

"You always talk in that way!" said Gianluca, with a wearily sad intonation. "I suppose that life is different in Sicily."

"Life is life, everywhere," returned the Sicilian. "If I love a woman, it is not for the pleasure of loving her, nor for the glory of having it written on

my tombstone that I have died for her. It is better that some one else should die and that I should have what I want. How does that seem to you? Is it not logic? It is true that I have never loved any woman in that way. But then, I am young, though I am older than you are."

"What can I do?" The pale young man smiled sadly and shook his head. "You do not understand our society. I cannot even see her except at a distance, unless they choose to permit it. I cannot write love letters to her, can I? In our world one cannot do such things, and it would be of no use if I could —"

"I would," said Taquisara. "I would write. I would see her — I would empty hell and drag Satan out by the hair to help me, if the saints would not. But you! You sit still and die of love. And when you are dead, what will you have? A fine tomb out in the country, and lights, and crowns, and some masses — but you will not get the woman you love. It is not love that consumes you. It is imagination. You imagine that you are going to die, and unless you recover from this, you probably will. With your temperament, the best thing you can do is to come with me to Sicily and forget all about Donna Veronica Serra. No woman would ever look at a man who loves as you do. She might pity you enough to marry you, if no one else presented himself just then; but when she was tired of pitying

you she would love some one else. It is not life to be always pitying. That is the business of saints and nuns — not of men and women."

Gianluca was hurt by his friend's tone.

"You admit that you never were in love," he said; "how can you understand me?"

"That is just it! I do not understand you. But if I were you, I would take matters into my own hands. I will wager anything you please that Donna Veronica has never so much as heard that you wish to marry her —"

"But they have told her, of course!" interrupted Gianluca. "They have asked her —"

"Who told you so?" inquired Taquisara, incredulously. "And if any one has told you, why should you believe it? There are several millions on the one side, which Macomer wishes to possess, and there can be nothing on the other but the word of one of the interested persons. You have met her in the world and exchanged a few words — that has been all —"

"I have spoken with her five times," said Gianluca, thoughtfully.

"Have you counted?" Taquisara smiled. "Very good — five times — seventeen, if you like — you, sitting on the edge of your chair and opening your eyes wide to see her profile while she was looking at her aunt — you, saying that it was a fine day, or that Tamagno was a great singer; and she, say-

ing 'yes' to everything. And you love her. Well, no doubt. I could love a woman with whom I might never have spoken at all — surely — and why not? But you take it for granted that she knows you love her and expects you to ask for her, and has been told that you have done so and has herself dictated the refusal. You are credulous and despondent, and you are not strong. Besides, you sit here all day long, brooding and doing nothing but expecting to die, and hoping that she will shed a tear when she hears of your untimely end. Is that what you call making love in Naples?"

"I have told you that I can do nothing."

"It does not follow that there is nothing to be done."

"What is there, for instance?"

"Go to the Palazzo Macomer and find out the truth yourself. Write to her — take your place before the door and stand there day and night until she sees you and notices you." Taquisara laughed. "Do anything — but do not sit here waiting to die in cotton wool with your feet to the fire and your head in the clouds."

"All that is absurd!" answered Gianluca, petulantly.

"Is it absurd? Then I will begin by doing it for you, and see what happens."

"You?" The younger man turned in surprise.

"I. Yes. All the more, as I have nothing to

lose. I will go and find Bosio Macomer and talk with him —"

"You will insult him," said Gianluca, anxiously. "There will be a quarrel — I know you — and a quarrel about her."

"Why should we quarrel?" asked Taquisara. "I will congratulate him on his betrothal. I know him well enough for that, and in the course of conversation something may appear which we do not know. Besides, if I go to the house, I may possibly meet Donna Veronica; if I do, I shall soon know everything, for I will speak to her of you. I know her."

"One sees that you are not a Neapolitan," said Gianluca, smiling faintly.

"No," answered the other, "I am not." And he laughed with a sort of quiet consciousness of strength which his friend secretly envied. "It is true," he added, "that things look easy to me here, which would be utterly impossible in Palermo. We are different with our women — and we are different when we love. Thank Heaven, for the present — I am as I am."

He smiled and relit his cigar, which had gone out.

"No," said Gianluca. "You have never been in love, I think."

His fair young head leaned back wearily against the chair, and his eyes were half closed as he spoke.

"Nor ever shall be, in your way, my friend,"

answered the Sicilian, rising from his seat. "I suppose it is because we are so different that we have always been such good friends. But then — one need not look for reasons. It is enough that it is so."

Again he took the delicate, thin hand in his and pressed it, and went away, much more anxious about Gianluca than he was willing to show. For though he had suspected much of what he now saw, as a possibility, it was a phase too new and startling not to trouble him greatly. It will readily be conceived that if Gianluca had always been the weak and dejected and despairing individual from whom Taquisara parted that morning, there could never have been much friendship between the two. But Gianluca, not in love, had been a very different person. With an extremely delicate organization and a very sensitive nature, he was naturally of a gay and sunny temper. The two had done voluntary military service in the same regiment during more than a year, and their rank, together with the fact that they were both from the south, had in the first place drawn them together. Before long they had become firm friends. In his normal condition Gianluca, though never strong, was brave, frank, and cheerful. Taquisara thought him at times poetic and visionary, but liked the impossible loftiness of his young ideals, because Taquisara himself was naturally attracted by all that

looked impossible. Amongst a number of rather gay and thoughtless young men, who jested at everything, Gianluca adhered to his faith openly, and no one thought of laughing at him. He must have possessed something of that wonderful simplicity, together with much of the extraordinary tact, which helped some of the early saints to be what they were — the saints who were beloved rather than those who were persecuted. Not, indeed, that his conduct was always saintly, by any means, nor his life without reproach. But in an existence which ruins many young men forever he preserved an absolutely unaffected admiration for everything good and high and true, and had the rare power of asserting the fact, now and then, without being offensive to others. Taquisara had no desire to imitate him, but was nevertheless very strongly attracted by him, and if Gianluca had ever needed a defender, the Sicilian would have silenced his enemies at the risk of his own life. Gianluca, however, was universally liked, and had never been in need of any such old-fashioned assistance.

Since he had been in love with Veronica Serra, he was completely changed, and it was no wonder that his friend was anxious about him. Taquisara, like most men of perfectly healthy mind and body, would have found it hard to believe that Gianluca was merely lovesick, and was literally

'consuming himself,' even to the point of death, in an unrequited passion. It was certainly true, however, that he had lost strength rapidly and without the influence of any illness which could be defined, ever since the negotiations for Veronica's hand had shown signs of coming to an unsatisfactory conclusion. And they had lasted long. Many letters had been exchanged. The old Duca had been several times to the Palazzo Macomer, and the count and countess had found many reasons by which to put off their decision. For Gianluca was a good match, and altogether an exceedingly desirable young man, and the countess had always thought that if she could not marry Veronica to Bosio, it might be wisest to accept Gianluca. He was always in delicate health, Matilda reflected, and he might possibly die and leave his wife still absolute mistress of her fortune, if the marriage contract were cleverly framed with a view to that contingency.

But the young man himself had been diffident from the beginning, and at the first hesitation on the other side he had taken it for granted that all was lost. His slight vitality sank instantly under the disappointment, he refused to eat, he could not sleep, and he was in a really dangerous state before ten days had passed. Then he had sent for Taquisara, who visited him daily for nearly a week, encouraging him in every way, until to-day, when

the news of the refusal was no more to be denied. It was characteristic of the Sicilian that he at once attempted to interfere with destiny in favour of his friend. He was not a man to lose time when time was precious. His ardent temper loved difficulties, even when they were not his own. Bold, untiring, discreet, and loyal, if there were anything to be done in Gianluca's case, he was the man to do it.

Bosio Macomer was somewhat surprised that morning, when his old servant informed him that Taquisara was at the door. He knew him but slightly in the way of acquaintance, though very well by name and reputation, and he wondered what had brought him at that hour. He was inclined to say that he could not receive him, offering as an excuse that he was ill, which was almost true. But he reflected that such a man must have a good reason for wishing to see him. He remembered, too, that the Duca had spoken of him as Gianluca's friend, and in the terrible position in which Bosio himself was placed, it seemed to him possible that one of Gianluca's friends might help him, — how, he had not the power of concentrating his mind enough to guess, — and he ordered the servant to admit him.

Bosio had not slept that night. He had spent the six hours between midnight and the December dawn in his easy-chair before the fireplace. Once

or twice, towards morning, he had felt sleep creeping upon him through sheer physical exhaustion, but he had fought it off, afraid to lose one of the precious moments which he still had before him in which to think over what he should do. They were few enough, for a man of his nature.

He knew the absolute truth of all that Matilde had told him, and he had even suspected much of it before she had first spoken. He knew that his brother had secretly ruined himself in financial speculations, in which he had employed Lamberto Squarci as his agent, and that, with Squarci's assistance, Gregorio had staved off the consequences of his actions by a fraudulent use of Veronica's fortune, — of such part of it as he could control, of course, — absorbing much of the enormous income, and even, from time to time, obtaining the consent of Cardinal Campodonico for the sale of certain lands, on pretence of making more profitable investments. During fully ten years, Gregorio's management of the estate must have been a systematic fraud upon Veronica Serra, carried on with sufficient skill to evade all inquiry from the cardinal. Gregorio's fictitious reputation as a strictly honourable man had helped him, together with the fact that his wife was the ward's own aunt, which was a strong presumption in favour of her honesty as a guardian. Then, too, it was generally believed that Macomer was a miser, and much richer than he

allowed any one to suppose. As for the accounts of the estate, they could bear inspection, as Matilde had said, provided that no attempt were made to verify the existence of all the property therein described.

The worst of the case was that Squarci had been an accomplice from the beginning, and had doubtless enriched himself while Macomer had lost everything. In the event of a suit brought by the ward against the guardians, it would be in Squarci's power to turn evidence in favour of Veronica, and expose the whole enormous theft; and it would be like him to keep on the side of wealth against ruin. For Veronica was still very rich, in spite of all that had been stolen.

There could be little doubt but that in the event of an action, Gregorio and Matilde Macomer would be condemned to penal servitude, as the countess herself anticipated. It was equally certain that if Veronica married any one but Bosio, her husband and his family would demand that the accounts of the estate should be formally audited and the property scheduled; this must ultimately lead to the dreaded prosecution, which could have no possible conclusion but conviction and infamy.

Whatever Bosio's true relations with Matilde had been in the course of the last ten years, he had at least loved her faithfully, with the complete devotion of a man who not only loves a

woman, but is morally dominated by her in all the circumstances of life. He had not the character which seeks ideals, and he asked for none.

Matilde's beauty and conversation had sufficed him, for in his opinion he had never known any one to be compared with her; and on her side she had been strong enough to make a slave of him from the first. To the extent of his weak character and considerable physical courage, there was no sacrifice which Bosio would not have been ready to make for her, and few dangers which he would not at least have attempted to face for her sake.

But where all moral sense of right and all natural action of conscience were gone, there remained in the man an inheritance of traditional feeling, which even Matilde's influence could not make him wittingly violate any further,—a remnant of honour, a thread, as it were, by which his soul was still held above the level of total destruction. There was nothing, perhaps, involving himself alone, which he would have refused to do for Matilde's sake, under the pressure of her strong will. But what she required of him now was more than that, and worse. After a night of thought, he still felt that he could not do it.

Of course, there was the possibility that Veronica herself might absolutely refuse to marry him, and thus save his weakness from the necessity of trying to be strong. But Bosio thought this improbable.

The fatherless and motherless girl had been purposely kept from all outside influences by Gregorio and Matilde, in order that they might control her disposition for their own interests. She had been taught to expect that in due time they would select a husband for her from the men who might offer themselves, and that it would be more or less her duty to accept their decision, as being really the best for her own happiness. They had hindered her from forming friendships with girls of her own age, and altogether from acquaintanceship with young married women, excepting Bianca Corleone, who had been her friend in the convent. In society, when she went with them, men were introduced to her very rarely. Bosio had been present once or twice on such occasions, and he remembered having seen her with Gianluca. It had been very much as Taquisara had described it to Gianluca himself — a mere exchange of a few words, while the girl watched her aunt almost all the time with a sort of childish fear of doing something not quite right. Veronica could not be said to know any man to the extent of exchanging ideas with him, except her uncle and Bosio himself. And she liked Bosio very much. It was not at all improbable, considering all the circumstances, that she might be delighted with the idea of marrying him, merely because she liked him, and he was familiar in her daily life. Bosio knew that Matilde would

speak to her about it at once; and when he tried to think what he should do if Veronica readily accepted the proposition, the pain in his head grew intolerable, and he found it impossible to think connectedly. The horrible dishonour of it stared him in the face — and beyond the dishonour, still more fearfully imposing, rose the vision of sure disgrace and infamy for the woman he loved, if he himself refused to do this vile deed.

He looked ill, worn out with mental distress and physical exhaustion, when Taquisara entered the room, and the servant closed the door. The Sicilian came forward, and Bosio rose to meet him, still wondering why he had come, but far too much disturbed by his own troubles to care. Nevertheless, he supposed that the matter must be of some importance. Taquisara was surprised by his appearance, for he was evidently suffering.

"I ought almost to ask you to excuse me for having received you, in my condition," said Bosio, politely. "I have a violent headache. But I am wholly at your service. In what can I be of use to you?"

Taquisara found himself in an awkward position. He had expected to find Bosio Macomer radiant and ready to be congratulated by any one who chose to knock at his door. Instead, he found a man apparently both ill and distressed. He hesitated a moment, for he knew Bosio but slightly, after all.

"I do not know whether you will think it strange that I should come," he said, and his square face grew more square as he looked straight at Bosio. "I am Gianluca della Spina's best friend."

"Ah! Yes — I think I have heard so," answered Bosio, not startled, but considerably disturbed, as his gentle eyes met Taquisara's bold glance.

"I have come, as a friend, to ask whether it is really true that you are to marry Donna Veronica Serra," continued Taquisara, feeling that after all he might as well go straight to the point.

Bosio straightened himself a little in his chair, and there was a look of surprise in his face. But he hesitated an instant, in his turn.

"That was the answer which my brother and his wife gave to the Duca della Spina," he replied coldly.

"Yes," said Taquisara. "I know it was. That is the reason why I have come to you, directly, as Gianluca's friend."

"Does Don Gianluca propose to call me out, because he cannot marry Donna Veronica?" asked Bosio, in surprise, and in a tone which showed that he was already offended.

"No. He is very ill, and in no condition for that sort of amusement."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Bosio, with cold civility. "But you come to represent him, in some way. Do I understand?"

"He is ill — of love, as they say." Taquisara

smiled at the idea, in spite of himself. "It is serious, at all events — so serious, that I have come in person to ask whether it is really true that you are betrothed to Donna Veronica, in order that I may take him the truth as I hear it from your lips. I daresay you think me indiscreet, Count Macomer, for I am only slightly acquainted with you. But I am sincerely devoted to Gianluca, and if you were a total stranger to me, I should come to you as I have come now."

"And if I refuse to answer your question, Baron Taquisara — what then?"

"As the answer — yes or no — cannot possibly involve anything in the slightest degree indelicate, I shall of course infer that you have no answer to give, and that the matter is not yet really settled."

Bosio's eyebrows contracted spasmodically, and his white hand stroked his silky beard, while his eyes turned quickly from his guest and looked down at the carpet. In two passes, as though they had been fencing together, this singularly direct man had thrust him to the wall, and was forcing him to make a decision. Of course it was still in his power to answer in one way or the other, though he was yet undecided. But he honestly could not bring himself to say that he would marry Veronica, and yet, if he denied that he was betrothed to her, he must put his brother and Matilde in the position of having told a deliberate lie to Gianluca's

father. He felt that he was growing confused, and that his hesitation and confusion were every moment making it clearer to Taquisara that the betrothal was by no means as yet a fact. He tried to temporize.

"It depends upon what you understand by an engagement," he said. "With us, here in Naples, the betrothal means the signing of the marriage contract. Now, the contract has not even been discussed. I think that my brother's announcement was premature, though it was perhaps justifiable, as he wished to discourage any false expectations on the part of Don Gianluca."

"I am not a diplomatist," answered the Sicilian. "The statement was categorical — that you were betrothed to Donna Veronica. For the sake of my friend, I am indiscreet enough to wish to hear the confirmation of the statement from your own lips, without in the least questioning the right of the Count Macomer to make it last night. Gianluca is honestly and very deeply in love. The happiness of his whole life is involved. With his delicate constitution and sensitive temper, I believe that his life itself is in danger. You will be doing him an honourable kindness in letting him know the truth, through me."

"I will," said Bosio, absently, "I will — as soon as — " He checked himself and glanced nervously at Taquisara.

"As soon as you yourself have decided," said the latter, quietly. "I think I understand. Your brother and the countess feel quite sure of the fact, as though it had already taken place, but for some reason which does not concern me, you yourself are not so certain of the result. To be plain, there is still a possibility that the marriage may not take place. I need not tell you that in speaking to Gianluca I shall be very careful not to raise any false hopes in his mind. But I am exceedingly indebted to you for being so honourably frank with me."

Taquisara repressed a smile at his own words as he rose from his seat, for he was very far from wishing to offend Bosio. The latter rose, too, and looked at him with a dazed, uncertain expression, like a man not quite sure of being in his senses. He put out his hand mechanically, without speaking, and a moment later he was alone with the horror of his desperate difficulty.

The Sicilian descended the stairs slowly, and paused to look out of one of the big windows at a landing, which offered nothing in the way of a view but an almost blank wall on the other side of the narrow street. He did not know what to do next, and yet, being eminently a man of action, rather than of reflexion, he knew that he must do more to satisfy himself, for his suspicions were aroused. He had expected to find Bosio jubilant. From

what he had seen, he had understood well enough that there was some mysterious trouble. He could not hope to extort any information from Macomer or his wife, and he had no means of reaching Veronica, nor could he have asked direct questions if he had succeeded in seeing her.

Suddenly, he thought of the young Princess Corleone, whom he knew tolerably well, Corleone being a Sicilian like himself. She was Veronica's only intimate friend. She was the niece of Cardinal Campodonico, one of Veronica's guardians. If any one knew the truth, she might be expected to know it.

Taquisara looked at his watch, lit a cigar, and left the gloomy Palazzo Macomer, glad to be outside and to turn his face to the sunshine, and his back upon all the wickedness of which its old walls kept the secret.

CHAPTER IV.

The villas along the shore towards Posilippo face the sun all day in winter, for they look due south from the water's edge, and their marble steps lead down into the tideless sea, as though it were a landlocked lagoon or a Swiss lake. In winter the roses blossom amongst the laurels, and before the rose leaves are all fallen the violets peep out in the borders; the broad, fan-like palms stand unsheltered in the south wind, and the oranges and lemons are left hanging on the trees for beauty's sake. There are but two changes in the year, from spring to summer, and from summer back to spring.

It is sometimes cold in Naples, high up in the city, when the northeast wind comes screaming from the snowy Abruzzi, and when Vesuvius is clad in white almost to the lower villages. In Naples it is sometimes dreary when the water-laden southwest sends up its mountains of black clouds. But somehow in soft Posilippo the wind is tempered and the rain seems but a shower, and spring and summer, summer and spring, ever join hands amongst the ilexes and the laurels and the orange trees.

On this day it was all summer, for there was not a cloud in the air nor a whitecap on the sea as the water gently lapped against the steps at the foot of Bianca Corleone's garden. It was so warm that she was sitting there herself, a book unread on her knees, her marvellous face towards the day, her small feet resting on the lower rail of another chair before her, just because the gravel might possibly be damp.

Beside her, and turned towards her, looking earnestly to her averted eyes, sat Pietro Ghisleri, the man who many years afterwards married Lady Herbert Arden, of whom many have heard,—a man young at that time and not world-worn as he was later, nor prematurely gaunt and weather-beaten. He was only five-and-twenty years of age, then, and the beautiful Bianca was but twenty-one, and had already been married two years to Corleone. But the suffering of a lifetime had been crushed into those two years; for Corleone was bad, from his head to his heart, all through, and she had believed that she loved him.

Then, half broken-hearted, she had listened to Ghisleri; and he loved her truly, with all his heart. Even society found little to say at that, and perhaps there was little enough to be said. To all intents and purposes, Corleone had abandoned her, and Ghisleri was often with her. It was not until later that her brother, Gianforte Campodo-

nico, lifted up his hand against Ghisleri for the first time.

So Ghisleri was sitting beside Bianca on that morning, in her garden, when there was a sound of wheels, behind the house; and then, unannounced, as one familiar with the place, Veronica Serra came swiftly down the walk towards the pair. Ghisleri rose to his feet, — a tall, fair man, sunburnt, lean and strong, with bright blue eyes, — and Bianca turned in her chair, with a smile, and held out her hand, as she sat, to the young girl.

"You do not mind?" asked Veronica, smiling innocently. "Am I not interrupting you?"

"No, dear — no." A very faint dawn of colour rose in Bianca's almost unnatural pallor.

"Something so strange has happened," said Veronica.

Then she nodded to Pietro Ghisleri, realizing that she had forgotten him. He moved forward for her the chair on which he had been sitting, while he continued to stand. Veronica had often met him there before.

"Donna Veronica has something to say to you," he said to Bianca. "If you will allow me, I will go up to the stable and look at that dog."

Bianca nodded, as though it were a matter of course that Pietro should look after her dogs when there was anything the matter with them, and Veronica sat down. Her expression was strange,

Bianca thought, as though she did not know whether to laugh or cry. Yet she looked fresh and well and not tired. The girl told her story in half a dozen words, as soon as Ghisleri was out of hearing.

"They want me to marry Bosio," she said, and then drew breath, holding both of Bianca's hands and looking into her eyes.

"You? Marry Bosio Macomer? Oh! no — Veronica — no!"

Bianca's voice expressed the greatest apprehension, for Veronica was almost her only intimate friend. Veronica seemed surprised.

"Why not?" she asked. "That is, if I wished to. Why do you speak in that way? Do you know anything about him which I do not know? You must have some reason."

Bianca's exquisite face grew calm and grave, and she looked away, and waited some seconds before she spoke. The sins of the earth were familiar to her before her time, and the suffering and the payment. But Veronica was a child.

"It seems unfitting," she said, quietly. "He is almost like your uncle. Of course, one may marry one's uncle — but he is too old for you, dear. And, after all, with your name, and all you have — "

"But I like Bosio," answered Veronica, simply. "He is always good to me. I talk with him a great deal. And he is really not old, though his hair is a

little grey. I think I would perhaps rather have him just for a friend, instead of a husband. But then, he would be both. I do not know what to do, so I came to you for advice."

"Why do you not marry Gianluca della Spina?" asked Bianca, suddenly.

"Don Gianluca?" repeated Veronica, rather blankly. "Why him, particularly? I have only seen him three or four times."

"He is dying of love for you, my dear," said Bianca. "At least, every one says so. I have heard it from Taquisara and from Signor Ghisleri, who are friends of his."

"Dying of love for me?" Veronica broke out in a girlish laugh. "How absurd! Why does he not ask for me, if that is true? Not that I would ever marry him! He is like a Perugino angel, with his yellow hair and blue eyes."

She laughed again. Bianca knew from Ghisleri that Gianluca's father had done his best to bring about the marriage. She was amazed to find that Veronica knew nothing of the negotiations.

"It is very strange," she said thoughtfully, and hesitating as to how much she should tell of what she had heard.

"What is strange?" asked the young girl.

"That you should not have known about Gianluca. They go to see him every day. He is really madly in love with you, and is positively ill about it.

That is why I say that you should marry him, if you marry at all — but not your uncle Bosio."

"He is not my uncle," said Veronica. "He is my aunt's brother-in-law."

"It is the same thing — "

"No. It is not the same. Tell me all about Don Gianluca. It is interesting — I feel like a heroine in a book — a man dying for love of me, whom I scarcely know! It is too ridiculous! He must be in love with my fortune, as my aunt says that so many people are."

"No, dear," said Bianca, gravely, "do not say that. It is for yourself, and he does not need your fortune."

"I did not mean to say anything unkind," answered Veronica. "But I scarcely know him — and I have heard nothing about it. Have they spoken of the marriage?"

"Yes."

They were interrupted by a servant, who came quickly down from the house. The man asked if the princess would receive Baron Taquisara. Bianca ordered him to be admitted, and told the man to ask Ghisleri to come back from the stables.

"Do you know Taquisara?" she asked Veronica.

"A Sicilian? With a bronze face and fiery eyes? I have seen him once or twice at balls, I think. Yes — he was introduced to me somewhere. I

remember him because they say he is descended from Tancred."

"Yes," said Bianca. "I could not refuse to receive him, because Signor Ghisleri is here. They will both go away before long, and then we can talk. Can you stay to breakfast with me?"

"Oh, no! I should not dare to do that!" Veronica laughed a little. "No one knows where I am," she added. "My aunt thinks I have gone for a drive to think over the matter. I just pulled down the curtain of the brougham and told the man to bring me here — all alone."

At this moment Taquisara and Ghisleri appeared on the gravel path, walking side by side, two men strongly contrasted with each other, Italians of the Lombard and the Saracen types, fine specimens both, in the prime of youth and strength. Bianca gave the Sicilian her hand, and he bowed gravely to Veronica. Ghisleri brought out more chairs, and without the slightest hesitation sat down beside Bianca, forcing Taquisara to place himself near the young girl.

Taquisara was a man almost incapable of anything like social timidity, in whatever position he might be placed, and he was in reality delighted at thus being thrust upon Donna Veronica, from whom he felt sure that he should learn something about the projected marriage. For he had great and unaffected confidence in himself. But he hesitated a moment

before he spoke, for he did not now remember that he had ever before entered intentionally into a serious conversation with a young girl, in the whole course of his life. The customs of the society in which he lived made such things well-nigh impossible. As usual with him, he meditated going straight to the matter in hand, and he only paused to consider what words he should use. Veronica, as she had been taught to do in such a position, looked vacantly before her at the roots of the trees, waiting for him to say something.

He had not seen her, except from a distance, since Gianluca had fallen so madly in love with her, and while she looked away from him, his bold eyes scrutinized her face. He saw what she had seen, when she had looked into the glass on the previous evening — neither more nor less, except that she was dressed for walking, and something feathery was around her slender throat — and she wore a hat, which, in her own opinion, changed her appearance very much. But, as he looked, he was aware that there was more in her face than he had supposed.

There was something in the expression which was, all at once, far more beautiful to him, than anything he had ever discovered in the sad and faultless features of the already famous beauty who sat beside her. Unconsciously, as he realized it, he forgot that ne was expected to speak.

Then, wondering at his silence, and conscious of his gaze, Veronica turned her face to his, with a shy look of girlish inquiry, and their eyes met. Taquisara was too dark to blush, but to his own surprise he felt that the blood had mounted in his face, and in Veronica's own thin, young cheeks there was a faint and lovely tinge which lasted but a moment and then faded, coming again more strongly as she turned her eyes away. Then he felt that he must speak. Ghisleri and Bianca, on the other side, had begun at once to talk, and their voices, unknown to themselves, had sunk to a low key.

"I am very glad I have met you here, this morning, Donna Veronica," said Taquisara, leaning forward so as to speak close to her, but looking down at the gravel under his feet. "I had something especial to say to you."

Veronica glanced at him, half startled. His tone and manner were quite different from anything she had hitherto heard and seen. She saw that he was not looking at her, and her eyes went back to the roots of the trees.

"Yes," she said, almost inaudibly, for she did not know whether he expected her to say anything.

"I have a very good friend, Donna Veronica," he continued: "I have been with him this morning. You have heard his name often of late, I think, and you know him — Gianluca della Spina."

Veronica started a little, and again the colour came and went in her delicate face.

"Yes," she said. "I — I know him a little."

"He loves you, Donna Veronica," Taquisara said, his voice softening almost to a whisper, for he did not wish Bianca Corleone to hear him. "He loves you so much that he is almost dangerously ill — indeed, I think it is dangerous — because you will not marry him."

He paused to see what she would do. She quickly turned her startled eyes to him, and her lips parted, but she said nothing. He raised his face and met her look as he went on.

"Last night, his father was at your house, and he was told that there was no hope, because you were betrothed to Count Bosio Macomer."

"They told him that?" asked Veronica, quickly, and the colour mounted a third time in her cheeks. "But it is not true!" she added; and her eyes set themselves sharply, for she was angry.

"No," said Taquisara, "I know that it is not quite true, for I have been to see Count Bosio. I was there half an hour ago."

"You have quarrelled?" asked Veronica, in sudden anxiety.

"Quarrelled? no. Why should we quarrel? He gave me to understand that nothing was settled. I thanked him, and came away. I did not hope to see you; but I knew that the Princess Corleone

was your best friend, as I am Gianluca's. I thought I would speak to her. Since, by a miracle, we have met, I have spoken directly to you. Do you forgive me? I hope so, though I daresay that no mere acquaintance has ever talked as I am talking. If you blame me, remember that it is for Gianluca, that he is my friend, that he knows nothing of my speaking to you, since you and I have met by chance, and that he is perhaps dying — dying for you, Donna Veronica."

The girl's face was white and grave now, for Taquisara spoke in earnest.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed.

Bianca turned her head, for she was not so much absorbed in her conversation with Ghisleri as not to have noticed that Veronica and Taquisara were speaking almost in whispers, which was strange conduct for a young girl with a mere acquaintance, to say the least of it.

"What is so dreadful?" she asked, with a smile.

"Oh! — nothing," answered Veronica, glancing at her, and turning back instantly to Taquisara.

A shade of annoyance was in his face, and Veronica felt suddenly that this was the first real crisis in her life, and that she must hear all he had to say, to the end, at any cost of propriety.

"Come!" she said to Taquisara.

She rose as calmly as a married woman, many years older than she, might have done, and Taqui-

sara was on his feet at the same moment. She led the way down to the marble steps that descended to the sea, and stood on the uppermost one, looking out. Bianca and Ghisleri watched her in surprise and Bianca made a slight movement, as though to follow, but then leaned back again. There was then, and still is, a very strong feeling in Southern Italy against allowing a young girl to be out of earshot with a man.

Though Bianca and Veronica had been children together, and there was little difference of age between them, Bianca felt that, as the married woman, she was responsible for the observance of social custom. But in a moment she realized that Taquisara was talking of Gianluca, and that anything would be better than to allow Veronica to marry Bosio Macomer.

"I understand," she said to Ghisleri; "let them alone. It is better, so long as only you and I see it."

Down by the steps, Veronica stood very still, looking out over the blue water, and Taquisara was beside her. She waited for him to speak again, sure that he had not said all.

"Such things seem improbable in these days," he said quietly. "You say that it is dreadful. It is. I have seen it, and have been with him day after day. I am not very sensitive, as a rule, but I have had a strange impression which I shall never for-

get. Gianluca and I met when we were serving our time as volunteers. He was unlike the rest of us, even then. That was why we became friends — because he was unlike me, I suppose."

"Unlike — in what way?" asked Veronica, still looking at the sea.

"It is hard to explain. He is a man of ideals, a religious man, a good man." Taquisara smiled gravely. "That was enough to make him quite different from us all, was it not?"

"I do not know," said the young girl. "Are all men bad, as a rule?"

"Perhaps," answered the Sicilian, shortly. "At all events, Gianluca was not. One saw that all the little that was bad in his life was only a jest, while all the much that was good was real and true."

"You are indeed his friend," said Veronica, softly.

She was struck by the beauty of what the man had said so plainly and unaffectedly.

"Yes, I am his friend," replied Taquisara. "One of his friends, say, — for he has many. I am his friend as you are the friend of Donna Bianca. You understand that, do you not? And you understand that there is nothing you would not do for a friend? Not out of mere obligation, because your friend has done much for you, but just for friendship — love, if you choose to call it so. I have heard people speak eloquently of friendship — so have

you perhaps. And we both understand what it means, though many do not. That is why I speak as I do, and if I do not speak well, you must forgive me, and feel the meaning I cannot express to your ears. Gianluca loves you, Donna Veronica, as men very rarely love women, so immensely, so strongly, that his love is burning up his life in him — and it has all been kept from you for some reason or other, while your relations are doing their best to make you marry Bosio Macomer, who can no more be compared with Gianluca della Spina than —"

He checked himself, for he felt that his tone was contemptuous, and remembered that Veronica might perhaps like Bosio. She was listening, her eyes fixed on the distance, her mind wide open to the new experience of life which had come so unexpectedly.

"He cannot be compared with Gianluca," continued Taquisara, modifying his sentence and omitting whatever simile had presented itself in his thoughts. "If you knew Gianluca, you would understand. It is because I know him well that I speak for him, that I implore you, pray you, beseech you, to see him before you consent to marry Count Bosio —"

"To see him!" exclaimed Veronica, startled at the sudden proposition, which was a blow to every tradition she had ever learned.

But the Sicilian was not a man to hesitate at trifles where women were concerned, nor men either.

"Yes — to see him!" he answered with a certain vehemence. "Is it a sin? Is it a crime? Is it dishonourable? Why should you cry out? What is society that it should take you young girls by the throat, like martyrs, and chain you with proprieties to the stake of its rigid law — to be burnt to death afterwards by slow fire, like your best friend there, Donna Bianca? Ah — you understand that. You know her life, and I know it too. It is the life — or the death — to which you may look forward if you will neither open your eyes to see, nor raise your hand to guard yourself. And you cry out in outraged horror at the idea of seeing Gianluca della Spina here, in this garden, by these steps, under God's sunlight, as you see me here to-day by accident. It seems to you — what shall I say? — unladylike!" Taquisara laughed scornfully. "What does it matter whether you are unladylike or not, so long as you are womanly, and kind, and brave? I am telling you truths you have never heard, but you have a woman's right to hear them, whatever you may think of me. And I speak for another. I have the holy right to say for him, for his life, for his happiness, all that I would not say for myself, perhaps. And I do say, what is to prevent Gianluca from being here to-morrow, or this very afternoon,

as I am here now, and why should it be such a dreadful thing for you to come here, knowing that you will meet him? Do you think that he would not give the last drop of his blood, at one word from your lips, to save you from trouble, or danger, or insult? Do you think, if he knew how I am speaking to you — speaking roughly, perhaps, because I am rough — he would not turn upon me, his friend, who am fighting for his life, and quarrel with me, and disown me, because my roughness comes near you and may offend you? You do not know him. How should you? But because you do not know him and cannot guess how he loves you, do not throw his life away without seeing it, without understanding what you despise, and learning that it is far above your contempt — a noble life, an honest life, a true-hearted young life, which may be lived out for you only — and, for you, I think it would be worth living."

Taquisara was a man who could be in earnest for his friend, and there was a strong vibration in his low voice which few could have heard with indifference. While he was speaking and forcing the appeal of his honest black eyes upon Veronica's face, she could not help slowly turning to meet them, and her lips parted a little as though in wonder, while she drank in eagerly the words he spoke. It was the first time in her life that she had ever heard a man speak to her of love, and, in his rough

eloquence, he spoke well and strongly, though it was not for himself. In his own cause, the words might not have come so readily, but they were not now the less evidently sincere, because they were many. She was glad that she had boldly risen and left Bianca's side, in order to hear him. But when he paused, she scarcely knew what to answer. She wanted to hear more. It was as though a dawn were rising, high and clear, in the dim country through which childhood had led her, and she longed suddenly for the full light of broad day.

"Indeed, you speak as though you loved him," she said.

"Yes, but I am trying to tell you how he loves you, and I cannot, though I know it all. You must hear it for yourself, you must see him, you must know him —"

"But it is impossible —" Veronica's protest broke off rather weakly in the middle.

"It is impossible that you should be here to-morrow at this hour? Perhaps — I do not know. But to-morrow at this hour Gianluca will be here, though he has not been able to leave the house for a week; and if you come, all the impossibility is gone. It is as simple as that —"

"That is an appointment — with a man —"

Again the blood rushed to the young girl's face, but this time it was genuine shame of doing a

thing which she had been taught to think the most dreadful in the whole world.

"An appointment!" Taquisara laughed contemptuously. "Do you not come often to see the Princess Corleone? You will come again. And Gianluca will come often, too — and if you chance to meet to-morrow, it will be an accident of fate, that is all, as you chanced to see me here to-day. You cannot forbid him to come here. You cannot, without a reason, ask Donna Bianca to refuse to receive him —"

"Oh! — if she ever guessed —" Veronica checked herself, still blushing, but Taquisara was too sincerely in earnest to smile at the slip she had made.

"That is all," he said. "There is neither appointment, nor engagement, nor anything but the possibility of a meeting which you cannot be sure of avoiding, unless you never come to see your friend, or unless you give her some unjust reason for not letting him come, in case he calls. There is nothing but chance. How can I tell whether you will come to-morrow, or not? I shall perhaps never know, for I shall not come with him. I have been here to-day — what excuse could I give for calling again to-morrow? Donna Bianca would think it strange. I can hope, for his sake. I can tell you that no woman has the right to throw away such love as his, to ruin such a life as his, to break such a heart without a thought and with-

out so much as hearing the man speak — whatever this wretched society in which we live may say about proprieties and rights and wrongs, and the difference between the proper behaviour for young girls and married women. This is God's earth, Donna Veronica — not society's!"

Veronica said nothing; but there was perplexity in her face, and she looked down, and pulled at one finger of her glove. She was wondering whether, if she came on the next day, and stood with Gianluca della Spina on that very spot, he would speak for himself as strongly and well as his friend had been speaking for him.

Somehow, she doubted it, and somehow, too, she knew that if by magic Taquisara should all at once turn out to be the real Gianluca, — not the Gianluca she knew, — she should be better satisfied with the world. For as things seemed just then, she was not satisfied at all, and the future was more dim and uncertain than ever. Still she looked down, thinking, and Taquisara glanced at her occasionally, and respected her silence.

"You do not know Bosio Macomer," she said, at last. "Or you know him little. If you chanced to be his friend, instead of Don Gianluca's, you could speak as eloquently for him."

"I think not," answered Taquisara. And his lip curled a little, though she did not see the expression.

"Why not? You do not know him. How can you tell? A little while ago, you said that he was not to be compared to your friend. How can you be so sure? Everything is not written in men's faces."

"I judge as I can, from what I see and know."

"So do I."

"From seeing and knowing the one and not the other. That is it. All I ask is that you will wait until you know both, before you make up your mind — a week — no more, if you can spare no more. It is not for me to tell you what your rights are, that you are not in the position of the average young girl, just from the convent, who accepts the choice her father and mother make for her — because, perhaps, she may never have another; and, at all events, because she cannot choose. You have the world to choose from, and — forgive me for saying it — you have no one to choose for you but those who are interested in the choice. May I speak?"

She hesitated, and their eyes met for a moment.

"Yes," she said suddenly.

"Count Bosio may be the best of men. I do not know. But he is the middle-aged, younger brother of Count Macomer, with a very slender fortune of his own and a position no better than the rest of us. If he marries you, he becomes Prince of Acireale, a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, a Grandee of

Spain of the First Class — and many times a millionnaire. For you have all that to give the man you marry. Grant that he is the best of men. Is his brother wholly disinterested? I speak plainly. It is rumoured that Count Macomer has lost most of his fortune in speculations. I do not know whether that is true. Even if it is not, what was all his fortune compared to what it would mean to him if his brother held yours?"

"My uncle never speculated in his life!" answered Veronica, rather indignantly.

"Grant that. The other side remains. And the countess? Is she wholly disinterested? Has she been disappointed by the marriage she made, or not? She was born a Serra, like yourself, and she married Macomer in the days of the old court, when he was a favourite with the old king and had a brilliant position, and people said that he might be one of the first men in the kingdom. But Garibaldi swept all that away, and Macomer's chances with it, and the countess is a disappointed woman, for her husband has remained just what he always was — plain Count Macomer, with his name and his palace, neither of them extraordinary. Truly, Donna Veronica, though you may refuse to speak to me again for what I say, I will dare to tell you that you must be very unsuspicious! They conceal from you the honourable offer of such a man as Gianluca della Spina, the eldest son of a great old

house, and they announce your betrothal with Count Bosio before either you or he know of it. One need not be very distrustful to think all that strange — even granting that Count Bosio is the best of men, a matter of which you are a judge."

"I would rather that you should not say those things to me," said Veronica, a little pale, and turning half round as though she would go back to Bianca and Ghisleri.

"Forgive me — for I have risked such opinion of me as you may have, to say them. There may be reasonable doubt about them. But of the rest — there is no doubt. There is a man's life in it, and death is beyond doubts, and a love that can take a man and tear him and hurt him until he dies has a right to a woman's hearing — and to her charity — before she throws it away. I ask no forgiveness of you for saying that. Gianluca will come to-morrow at this time, and he will come again until he sees you. I have kept you too long, Donna Veronica, and you have been kind in listening to me. If you need service in your life, use mine."

She said nothing, but gravely inclined her head a little when she had once more looked into his eyes, before she turned towards Bianca and walked slowly up the short, broad path by his side.

CHAPTER V.

Bosio felt that if he remained in his room alone with the horror of his position, he should go mad before night. He was weakly resolved not to marry Veronica, but he knew and for the first time dreaded the power Matilde had over his thoughts as well as his actions. He felt that if he could avoid her, he could still cling to the remnant of honour, but that she would tear it from him if she could and cast it to the winds. The whole card-house of his ill-founded life was trembling under the breath of fate, and its near fall seemed to threaten its existence.

He went out and walked slowly through sunny, unfrequented places, high up in the city, trying to shake off the chill of his fear as a man hopes to rid himself of an ague by sitting in the sun. But the chill was in his heart, and it was his soul that shivered. He weakly wished that he were wholly bad, that he might feel less.

Then, in true Italian humour, he tried to think of something which might divert his thoughts from the duty of facing their own terrible perplexity. If it had been evening, he would have strolled into

the theatre; had it been already afternoon, he would have had himself driven out along the public garden towards Posilippo, to see the faces of his friends go by. But it was morning. There was nothing but the club, and he cared little for the men he might meet there. There was nothing to do, and his eyes did not help him to forget his troubles. He wandered on through ways broad and narrow, climbing up one steep lane and descending again by the next, hardly aware of direction and not noticing whether he went east or west, north or south, up or down.

At last, at a corner, he chanced to read the name of a street. It was familiar enough to him, as a Neapolitan, but just now it reminded him of something which might possibly help to distract his attention. He stopped and got out his pocket-book, and found in it a card, glanced at the address on it, and then once more at the name of the street. Then he went on till he came to the right number, entered a gloomy doorway, black with dampness and foul air, ascended four flights of dark stone steps, and stopped before a small brown door. The card nailed upon it was like the one he had in his pocket-book. The name was 'Giuditta Astarita,' and under it, in another character, was printed the word 'Somnambulist.'

There was nothing at all unnatural in the name or the profession, in Naples, where somnambulists

are plentiful enough. And the name itself was a Neapolitan one, and by no means uncommon. The card, however, was white and clean, which argued either that Giuditta Astarita had not long been a professional clairvoyante, or else that she had recently changed her lodgings. Bosio knew nothing about her, except that she had suddenly acquired an extraordinary reputation as a seer, and that many people in society had lately visited her, and had come away full of extraordinary stories about her power. He rang the little tinkling bell, which was answered by a very respectably dressed woman servant with only one eye, — a fact which Bosio noticed because it was the blind side of her face which first appeared as the door opened.

The Signora Giuditta Astarita was at home, and there was no other visitor. Bosio, without giving his name, was ushered into a small sitting-room, of which the only window opened upon a narrow court opposite a blank wall. The furniture was scant and stiff, and such of it as was upholstered was covered with a cheap cotton corded material of a spurious wine colour. There were small square antimacassars on the chairs, and two of them, side by side, on the back of the sofa. The single window had heavy curtains, now drawn aside, but evidently capable of shutting out all light. A solid, square, walnut table stood before the sofa, without any table-cloth, and upon it were arranged half a dozen

large books, bound with a good deal of gilding, and which looked as though they had never been opened.

Bosio was standing before the window, looking out at the blank wall, when he heard some one enter the room and softly close the door. Giuditta Astarita came forward as he turned round.

He saw a heavy, phlegmatic woman, still very young, though abnormally stout, with an unhealthy face, thin black hair and large weak eyes of a light china blue. Her lips were parted in a sort of chronic sad smile, which showed uneven and discoloured teeth. She wore a long trailing garment of heavy black silk, not gathered to the figure at the waist, but loose from the shoulders down, and buttoned from throat to feet in front, with small buttons, like a cassock. From one of the upper buttonholes dangled a thin gold chain, supporting a bunch of small charms against the evil eye, a little coral horn, a tiny silver hunchback, a miniature gilt bell, and two or three coins of gold and silver, besides an Egyptian scarabee in a gold setting. The woman remained standing before Bosio.

"You wish to consult me, Signore?" she inquired, in a professional tone, through the chronic smile, as it were. Her voice was very hoarse.

Bosio bowed gravely, whereupon she pointed to a chair for him, drew another into position for herself, opposite his, and at some distance from it, and then fumbled in the curtains for the cord that pulled them.

"If you will sit down," she said, "I will darken the room."

Bosio seated himself, and in a moment the light was shut out as the heavy curtains ran together. Then he heard the rustle of the woman's silk dress as she sat down opposite to him in the dark. He felt unaccountably nervous, and her china blue eyes had made a disagreeable impression upon him. He expected something to happen.

"I see a name over your head," said a clear, bell-like voice, certainly not Giuditta Astarita's. "It is Veronica."

Bosio started uneasily, though like most Neapolitans, he had visited somnambulists more than once.

"Who is speaking?" he asked quickly.

"It is the spirit," said the woman's hoarse tones. "That is his voice. Is there such a person as Veronica in your life? Is it about her that you wish to consult the spirits?"

"Yes," said the spirit voice, before Bosio could answer. "You are afraid that they will murder her, if you do not marry her — or if she will not marry you."

Bosio uttered a loud exclamation of alarm and astonishment, for this was altogether beyond anything in his experience.

"Is it so?" asked Giuditta Astarita.

"Yes. It is true," said Bosio, in uncertain tones. "And I wish to know — whether —" he stopped.

"Whether the grey-faced man and the handsome woman whose eyes are near together will really kill her?" asked the spirit voice.

Bosio felt his soft hair rising on his head. "Do you know who I am?" he asked nervously.

"No," replied the voice of Giuditta. "The spirits know everything, but I do not. They only speak through me with another voice. I do not know what they are going to say. You need have no apprehension. This is more sacred than the confessional, Signore, more secret than the tomb."

The phrase sounded as though it had been carefully studied and often repeated, but the dramatic tone in which it was uttered produced a certain reassuring effect upon Bosio, in his half-frightened state.

"Do you wish to tell whether they will really kill Veronica?" inquired Giuditta. "If you have any question to ask, you must put it quickly. I cannot keep the spirits waiting. They exhaust me when they are impatient."

"What shall I do to avoid marrying her?" asked Bosio, suddenly springing to the main point of his doubts.

"The handsome woman whose eyes are near together will make you marry Veronica," said the spirit voice.

"But if I refuse? If I say that I will not? What then? Is her life really in danger?"

"Yes. They wish to kill her to get her money. The handsome woman has her will leaving her everything if she dies."

"But will they really kill her?" insisted Bosio, half breathless in his fear and nervous excitement.

The spirit voice did not answer. In the silence Bosio heard Giuditta Astarita's breathing opposite to him.

"Will they really kill her?" he asked again.

Still there was silence, and Bosio held his breath. Then Giuditta spoke hoarsely.

"The spirit is gone," she said. "He will not answer any more questions to-day."

"Can you not call it back?" asked Bosio, anxiously, and peering into the blackness before him, as though hoping to see something.

"No. When he is gone he never comes back for the same person. He answered you many things, Signore. You must have patience."

He heard her rise, and a moment later the light dazzled him as he looked up and met her china blue eyes. He was dazed as well as dazzled, for there had been an extraordinary directness and accuracy about the few questions and answers he had heard in the clear voice which was so utterly unlike Giuditta's, though quite human and natural. He was certain that he had not heard the door open after she had drawn the curtains. He looked about the scantily furnished room, in search of

some corner in which some third person might have been hidden. Giuditta Astarita's chronic smile was momentarily intensified.

"There was no one else here," she said, answering his unspoken question. "You heard the spirit's voice through my ears."

"How can that be?"

"I do not know. But what the spirit says is true. You may rely upon it. I do not know what it said, for when I return from the trance state I remember nothing I have heard or seen while I have been in it. If you wish to ask more, you must have the kindness to come again. It is very fatiguing to me. You can see that I am not in good health. The hours are from ten till three."

The smile had subsided within its usual limits, and the china blue eyes stared coldly. She was evidently waiting to be paid.

"What do I owe you?" asked Bosio, with a certain considerateness of tone, so to say.

"It is twenty-five lire," answered Giuditta Astarita. "I have but one price. Thank you," she added, as he laid the notes upon the polished walnut table. "Do you wish a few of my cards? For your friends, perhaps. I shall be grateful for your patronage."

"Thank you," said Bosio, taking his hat and going towards the door. "I have one of your cards. It is enough. Good morning."

As he opened the door, he found the one-eyed serving-woman in the passage, ready to show him out. Instinctively he looked at the single eye as he glanced at her face, and he was surprised to notice that it was of the same uncommon china blue colour as Giuditta's own. The woman who did duty as a servant to admit visitors was undoubtedly Giuditta's mother or elder sister, or some very near relative. It would be natural enough, amongst such people, as Bosio knew, but he wondered how many more of the same family lived in the rooms beyond the one in which he had received spirit-communications, and whether Giuditta Astarita supported them all by her extraordinary talents.

He descended the damp stone stairs and passed out into the street again, dazed and disturbed in mind. He had been to such people before, as has been said, and he had generally seen or heard something which had either interested or amused him. He had never had such an experience as this. He had never heard a voice of which he had been so certain that it did not come from any one in the room, and he had never found any somnambulist who had so instantly grasped his most secret thoughts, without the slightest assistance or leading word from himself. Yet at the crucial test — the question of a certainty in the future, this one had stopped short as all stopped, or failed in their predictions of what was to come. He had been

startled and almost frightened. Like many Southern Italians, he was at once credulous and sceptical — a superstitious unbeliever, if one may couple the two words into one expression. His intelligence bade him deny what his temperament inclined him to accept. Besides, on the present occasion, no theory which he could form could account for the woman's knowledge of his life. She had never seen him. He had no extraordinary peculiarity by which she might have recognized him at first sight from hearsay, nor was he in any way connected with public affairs. He had come quite unexpectedly and had not given his name, and the spirit, or whatever it might be, had instantly told him of Veronica, of her danger, of his brother and sister-in-law and of the will. Moreover, the friends who had spoken to him of Giuditta Astarita had told him similar tales within a few days.

The spirit had said that the handsome woman would make him marry Veronica. But what had the silence meant, when he had asked more? That was the question. Did it mean that the spirit was unwilling to affirm that Veronica must die if he refused to marry her? He passed his hand over his eyes as he walked. This was the end of the nineteenth century; he was in Naples, in the largest city of an enlightened country. And yet, the situation might have been taken from the times of the Medici, of Paolo Giordano Orsini, of Beatrice Cenci,

of the Borgia. There was a frightful incongruity between civilization and his life — between broad, flat, comfortable, every-day, police-regulated civilization, and the hideous drama in which he was suddenly a principal actor.

More than once he told himself that he was mistaken and that such things could not possibly be; that it was all a feverish dream and that he should soon wake to see that there was a perfectly simple, natural and undramatic solution before him. But turn the facts as he would, he could not find that easy way. If he refused to marry Veronica and attempted to get legal protection for her, the inevitable result would be the prosecution, conviction, and utter ruin of his brother and of the woman he loved. If he refused to marry Veronica and did nothing to protect her, Matilde's eyes had told him what Matilde would do to escape public shame and open infamy. If he married Veronica and saved his brother — he was still man enough to feel that he could not do that. He could die. That was a possibility of which he had thought. But would his death, which would save him from committing the last and greatest baseness, save Veronica? She would have one friend less in the world, and she had not many.

With a half-childish smile on his pale face, he wondered what such a man as Taquisara would do, if he were so placed, and the Sicilian's manly face

and bold eyes rose up contemptuously before him. To such a depth as Bosio had already reached, Taquisara could never have fallen. Bosio's instinct told him that.

If he had been able to find one friend in all his acquaintance to whom he might turn and ask advice, it would have been an infinite relief. But such friends were rare, he knew, and he had never made one. Pleasant acquaintances he had, by the score and the hundred, in society, and amongst artists and men of letters. But the life he had led had shut out friendship. To have a friend would have been to let some one into his life, and that would have meant, sooner or later, the betrayal of the woman he loved.

Yet, though he felt that Taquisara was his enemy and not his friend, he had such sudden confidence in the man's honour and truth that he was insanely impelled to go to him and tell him all, and implore him to save Veronica at any cost, no matter what, or to whom. Then of course, a moment later, the thought seemed madness, and he only felt that he was losing hold more quickly upon his saner sense. His visit to the somnambulist, too, had helped to unnerve him, and as he wandered through the streets he forgot that it was time to eat, so that physical faintness came upon him unawares and suddenly.

He did not wish to go home; for if he did, the

final decision would be thrust upon him by Matilde, and he did not feel that he could face another scene with her yet. When he found himself near the Palazzo Macomer, he turned back, walking slowly, and went towards the sea, till he came to the vast Piazza San Ferdinando, beyond San Carlo. He went into a café and sat down in a corner to drink a cup of chocolate by way of luncheon. The seat he had chosen was at the end of one of the long red velvet divans close to a big window looking upon the square. There were little marble tables in a row, and at the one before that which Bosio chose, a priest was seated, reading, with an empty cup before him. He was evidently near-sighted, for he held his newspaper so near his eyes that Bosio could not have seen his face even had he thought of looking at it. The priest had thrown back his heavy black cloak after he had sat down, so that it fell in wide folds upon the seat, on each side of him. His hands, which held up the paper, while he seemed to be searching for something in the columns, were thin to emaciation, almost transparent, and very carefully kept, — a fact which might have argued that he was not an ordinary, hardworking parish priest of the people, even if his presence in a fashionable café had not of itself made that seem improbable. On the other hand, he wore heavy, coarse shoes; his clothes, though well brushed, were visibly threadbare, and his

clean white stock was frayed at the edge and almost worn out. He had taken off his three-cornered hat, and his high peaked head was barely covered with scanty silver-grey hair. When he dropped his paper and looked about him for the waiter, evidently wishing to pay for his coffee, he showed a face sufficiently remarkable to deserve description. The prominent feature was the enormous, beak-like nose — the nose of the fanatic which is not to be mistaken amongst thousands, with its high, arching bridge, its wide, sensitive nostrils, and its preternaturally sharp, down-turning point. But the rest of the priest's face was not in keeping with what was most striking in it. The forehead was not powerful, narrow, prominent — but rather, broad and imaginative. The chin was round and not enough developed; the clean-shaven lips had a singularly gentle expression, and the very near-sighted blue eyes were not set deeply enough to give strength to the look. The priest carried his head somewhat bent and forward, in a sort of deprecating way, which made his long nose seem longer, and his short chin more retreating. The skull was unusually high and peaked at the point where phrenologists place the organ of veneration. The man himself was tall and exceedingly thin, and looked as though he fasted too often and too long. He was certainly a very ugly man, judged according to the standards of human beauty; and

yet there was about him an air of kindness and sincerity which had in it something almost saintly, together with a very unmistakable individual identity. He was one of those men whom one can neither forget nor mistake when one has met them once. Bosio did not notice him, being much absorbed by his own thoughts. The waiter came to ask what he wished, and was stopped on his way back by the priest, who desired to pay for what he had taken. But Bosio had turned to the window again, and sat looking out and watching the people in the broad semicircular Piazza.

The priest, having paid his little score, carefully folded his newspaper and put it into the wide pocket of his cassock. Then he gathered up the collar of his big cloak behind him, as he sat, and began to edge his way out from behind the little marble table. But the long folds had fallen far on each side — so far that Bosio had unawares sat down upon the cloth, and as the priest tried to get out, he felt the cloak being dragged from under him. The priest stopped and turned, just as Bosio rose with an apology on his lips, which became an exclamation of surprise, as he began to speak.

"Don Teodoro!" he cried. "You were next to me, and I did not see you!"

The priest's eyelids contracted to help his imperfect sight, and he smiled as he moved nearer to Bosio.

"Bosio!" he exclaimed, when he had recognized

him. "I am almost blind, but I was sure I knew your voice."

"You are in Naples, and you have not let me know it?" said Bosio, reproachfully and interrogatively.

"I have not been in Naples two hours, and have just left my bag at my usual quarters with Don Matteo. Then I came here to get a cup of coffee, and now I was going to you. Besides, it is the tenth of December. You know that I always come on the tenth every year, and stay until the twentieth, in order to be back in Muro four days before Christmas. But I am glad I have met you here, for I should have missed you at the Palazzo."

"Yes," said Bosio, "I am glad that we have met. Sit with me, now, while I drink a cup of chocolate. Then we will do whatever you wish." He sat down again. "I am glad you have come, Don Teodoro," he added thoughtfully. "I am very glad you have come."

Don Teodoro produced a pair of silver spectacles as he reseated himself, and proceeded to settle them very carefully on his enormous nose. Then he turned to Bosio, and looked at him.

"Have you been ill?" he asked, after a careful scrutiny of the pallid, nervous face.

"No." Bosio looked out of the window, avoiding the other's gaze. "I am nervous to-day. I slept badly; and I have been walking, and have not breakfasted. Oh! no — I am not ill. I am

never ill. I have excellent health. And you?" He turned to his companion again. "How are you? Always the same?"

"Always the same," answered the priest. "I grow old, that is the only change. After all, it is not a bad one, since we must change in some way. It is better than growing young — better than growing young again," he repeated, shaking his head sadly. "Since the payment must be made, it is better that the day of reckoning should come nearer, year by year."

"For me it has come," said Bosio, in a low voice, and his chin sank upon his breast, as he leaned back, clasping his hands before him on the edge of the marble table. The priest looked at him anxiously and in silence. The two would certainly have met later in the day, or on the morrow, and the accident of their meeting at the café had only brought them together a few hours earlier. For the hard-working country parish priest came yearly to Naples for a few days before Christmas, as he had said, and the first visit he made, after depositing his slender luggage at the house of the ecclesiastic with whom he always stopped, was to Bosio Macomer, his old pupil.

In his loneliness, that morning, Bosio had thought of Don Teodoro and had wished to see him. It had occurred vaguely to him that the priest generally made a visit to the city about that time of the

year, but he had never realized that Don Teodoro always arrived on the same day, the tenth of December, and had done so unfailingly for many years past.

Before he had been curate of the distant village of Muro, which belonged to the Serra family, Don Teodoro had been tutor to Bosio Macomer. He had lived in Naples as a priest at large, a student, and in those days, to some extent, a man of the world. When Bosio was grown up, his tutor had remained his friend — the only really intimate friend he had in the world, and a true and devoted one. It was perhaps because he was too much attached to Bosio that Matilde Macomer had induced him at last to accept the parish in the mountains with the chaplaincy of the ancestral castle of the Serra, — an office which was a total sinecure, as the family had rarely gone thither to spend a few weeks, even in the days of the late prince. Matilde hated the place for its appalling gloominess and wild scenery, and Veronica, to whom it now belonged, had never seen it at all. It had the reputation of being haunted by all manner of ghosts and goblins, and during the first ten years following the Italian annexation of Naples, the surrounding mountains had been infested by outlaws and brigands. But Don Teodoro, as curate and chaplain, received a considerable stipend which enabled him to procure for himself books at his pleasure, when he could bring himself

to curtail the daily and yearly charities in which he spent almost all he received.

He was, indeed, a man torn between two inclinations which almost amounted to passions, — charity and the love of learning, — and their action was so evenly balanced that it was a real pain to him either to deny himself the book he coveted, or to forfeit the pleasure of giving the money it would cost to the poor. He had sometimes kept the last note he had left at the end of the month for many days, quite unable to decide whether he should send it to Naples for a new volume, or buy clothes with it for some half-clad child. So sincere was he in both longings, that after he had disposed of the money in one way or the other, he almost invariably had an acute fit of self-reproach. His common sense alone told him that when he had given away nine-tenths of all he received, he had the right to spend the other tenth upon such food for his mind as was almost more indispensable to him than bread. But, besides this, he had been engaged for twenty years upon a history of the Church, in compiling which he believed he was doing a work of the highest importance to mankind; so that it appeared to him a duty to expend, from time to time, a certain amount of money in order to procure such books, old and new, as were necessary for his studies. As a matter of fact, the seasons themselves decided his conduct in these difficulties; for

in cold weather, or times of scarcity, his charity outran his desire for books; whereas, in the warm weather, and when there was plenty, and no pitiful starved faces gathered about his door, he bought books, instead of searching for the few who were still in need.

In his youth, Don Teodoro had travelled much. He had accompanied a mission to Africa at the beginning of his life, and had afterwards wandered about Europe, being at that time, as yet, more studious than charitable, and possessed of a small independence left him by his father, who had been an officer in the Neapolitan army in the old days. He had seen many things and known many men of many nations, before he had at last settled in Muro, in the little priest's house, under the shadow of the dismal castle, and close to the church. There he lived now, all the year round, excepting the ten days which he annually spent in Naples. The little house was full of books, and there was a big, old shaky press, containing his manuscripts, the work of his whole life. He had neither friends nor companions of his own class, but he was beloved by all the people. Playing on his name, Teodoro, in their dialect, they called him, 'O prevete d'oro' — 'the priest of gold.' And many said that he had performed miracles, when he had fasted in Lent.

This was practically Bosio Macomer's only inti-

mate friend. For although the intimacy had been interrupted for years, by circumstances, it had never been checked by any action or word of either. It is true that neither was, as a rule, in need of friendship, nor desirous of cultivating it. Learning and charity absorbed the priest's whole life. Bosio's existence, of which Don Teodoro knew in reality nothing, had moved in the vicious circle of a single passion, which he could never acknowledge, and which excluded, for common caution's sake, anything like intimacy with other men. But Bosio had not ceased to look upon the priest as the best man he had ever known, and in spite of his own errings, he was still quite able to appreciate goodness in others; and Don Teodoro had always remembered his pupil as one of the few men to whom he had been accustomed to speak freely of his hopes, and sympathies, and aspirations, feeling sure of appreciation from a nature at once refined and reticent, though itself hard to understand. For Don Teodoro was, strange to say, painfully sensitive to ridicule, though in all other respects a singularly brave man, morally and physically. As a child or as a boy, he had been laughed at by his companions for his extraordinary nose and his short sight; and he had never recovered from the childish suffering thus inflicted upon him by thoughtless children. The fear of being ridiculous had largely influenced him through life, and

had really contributed much towards deciding him to accept the cure of the wild mountain town.

Bosio's almost solemn words, as his chin fell upon his breast, and he clasped his hands before him, suddenly recalled to the priest the years they had spent together, the confidence there had been between them, the interest he had once felt in Bosio's fortune, — as an object once daily familiar, and fresh once and not without beauty, then long hidden for years, and coming suddenly to sight again, moth-eaten, dusty, and all but destroyed, is oddly painful to him who used it long ago, and then sees it when it is fit only to be thrown away.

"You are suffering," said Don Teodoro, leaning forward upon the marble table and peering through his silver-rimmed spectacles into Bosio's pale face, and gentle, exhausted eyes.

The priest's nervous, emaciated hand softly pressed the sleeve of the younger man's coat, and the fantastic features grew wonderfully gentle and kind. It was the transformation that came over them whenever any one was visibly poor, or starving, or sorrowing, or hurt, — the change which a beautiful passion brings to the ugliest face in the world.

Bosio smiled faintly as he saw it, and a little hope was breathed into his heart, as though somewhere, at some immeasurable distance, there might

be a possibility of salvation from the ruin and wreck of his horrible life.

"Yes," he said. "I am suffering. It is a great suffering. I do not think that I can live much longer."

"Can I do nothing?" asked Don Teodoro.

Bosio still smiled, as a man smiles in torture when one speaks to him of peace.

"If I believed that anything could be done," he said, "I should not suffer as I do. I have lived a bad life, and the time has come when I must pay the score. But it is not my fault if things are as they are — it is not all my fault."

The priest sighed, and looked away after a moment.

"We have all done some one great wrong thing in our lives," he said gently. "The price may perhaps be paid to God in good, as well as to man in pain."

CHAPTER VI.

Bosio shook his head, and a long silence followed. Once or twice he roused himself, stirred the cup of chocolate which the waiter had set before him, and sipped a teaspoonful of it absently. The corner where the two men sat together was quiet, but from the front of the café came the continual clatter of plates and glasses, the echo of feet, and the ring of voices; for it was just midday, and the place was full of its habitual frequenters.

"If we were in church," said Bosio at last, "and if you were in a confessional —"

He stopped, and glanced at his companion without completing the sentence.

"You would make a confession? There are churches near," said Don Teodoro. "I am ready. Will you come?"

Bosio hesitated.

"No," he said at last. "I could tell you nothing without betraying others."

"Betraying! Is it a crime that you have on your conscience?" The priest's voice was low and troubled.

"Many crimes," answered Bosio. "The crimes

that must come, and that I cannot prevent by living, nor hinder by dying."

Again there was silence during several minutes.

"You may trust me as a friend, even if, as a priest, you could not confess all the circumstances to me," said Don Teodoro, after the long pause. "I do not wish you to make confidences to me, unless you are impelled to do so. But you are in that frame of mind, my dear Bosio, in which a man will sooner or later unburden himself to some one. You might do worse than choose me. I am your friend, I am old, and I know that I am discreet. I am extraordinarily discreet. It may seem strange that I should say so myself, but my own life has taught me that I am to be trusted with secrets."

"Yes," replied Bosio. "You must have heard strange things sometimes under the seal of confession."

"I have known of strange things." Don Teodoro's face grew sad and thoughtful, and Bosio, seeing it, suddenly made up his mind.

He leaned far back against the painted wall for a moment, with half-closed eyes. Then he drew nearer to his friend, so that he spoke close to the latter's ear, though he looked down at the table before him. His nervous fingers played with the teaspoon in the saucer of his cup.

It was a strange confession, there in the corner of the crowded café at midday, and those who

glanced idly at the two men from a distance would hardly have guessed that an act in a mysterious life was before their eyes — an act which was itself but a verbal recapitulation of many actions past, but which to the speaker had an enormous importance of its own, and an influence on the future of all concerned.

Not much had been needed to break through the barrier of Bosio's reticence. Walking through the streets that morning he had for a moment even thought of telling some of his story to Taquisara. It was far easier to tell it to the only true friend he had in the world, to one in whom he had confided as a boy and had trusted as a young man. He told almost all. He confessed that his love of many years had been his brother's wife, and though he spoke no word of her love for him, the old priest knew the evil truth from the man's tone and look. For the rest he spared neither Matilde nor any one else, but told Don Teodoro all the truth, and all his anxious fears for Veronica's safety, if he should not marry her, with all his horror of his own shame if he should yield to the pressure brought upon him.

Don Teodoro's expression changed more than once while he listened, but he never turned his head nor moved in his seat.

"You see what I am," said Bosio, at last. "You see what my people are. Indeed, I need a confes-

sor, if one could save my soul; but I need a friend even more, for through me that poor girl is in danger of her life. That is her choice — to die or to be my wife. Mine is, to see her murdered or to do an unutterably shameful thing — or to see the woman I love driven out of the world with infamy for the crimes she has not committed, and the fear of that disgrace is making her mad. It is for her, and for Veronica! What do I care about myself? What have I left to care for? What I have done, I have done. I am not good, I am not religious, I am perhaps a worse sinner than most men, and a poorer believer than many. But I will not be the instrument of these deeds — and yet, if I refuse — there is death, or shame, or both, to those I love! At least I have spoken, and you will not betray me. It has been a relief, a moment's respite from torture. I thank you for it, my friend, and I wish I could repay you. You cannot give me advice, for I have twisted and turned it all in fifty ways, and there is no escape. You cannot help me, for no one can. But you have done me some little momentary good, just by sitting there and hearing my story. Beyond that there is nothing to be done."

The wretched man closed his eyes, and again leaned back against the bright red wall, which threw his white face and dark-ringed eyes into strong and painful relief. Don Teodoro was silent, bending his mind upon the hideous problem.

Bosio misunderstood him and spoke again without moving.

"I know," he said. "You need not speak. I know by heart all the reproaches I deserve, and I know that no human being, much less a holy man like yourself, could possibly feel anything but horror at all this — "

"I am very far from being a holy man," interrupted the priest. "If I feel horror, it is for what has been, and may be, but not for you. Bosio — " he hesitated a moment. "Will you come with me to Muro, and leave all this?" he asked suddenly. "Will you come out of the world for a while? No — I am not proposing to you to make a religious retreat. I wish I could. I know the world, and you, and your people, for I lived long among you, and I know that one cannot change one's soul, as one changes one's coat — nor enter upon a retreat as one springs into the sea for a bath in hot weather. What you have made yourself, you are. Heaven itself would need time to unmake you. I speak just as one man to another. Come with me to the mountains for a week, a month — as long as you will. It is dreary and cold, and you will have to eat what you can get; but you will have peace, for nobody will come up there to disturb you. Meanwhile, something may happen. You are overwrought by all you have seen and heard and felt. Whatever the countess may have said, Donna

Veronica is quite safe. My dear Bosio, people in your rank of life do not murder one another for money nowadays. It is laughable, the mere idea of it —"

"Laughable!" Bosio turned and looked at him. "If you had seen her eyes, you would find it hard to laugh, I think. Such things happen rarely, perhaps, but they happen sometimes."

Don Teodoro was not persuaded. He thought that Bosio, in his excited state, very much overestimated the danger.

"At all events," he said, "nothing will happen, so long as there is the possibility that you may marry her. If you come with me, you will at least have time to think before acting. But here, you may be forced to act before you have been able to think."

But Bosio shook his head slowly.

"There are difficulties which can be helped by putting them off," he answered. "This is not one. You forget that in just three weeks my brother will be ruined — absolutely ruined — if he cannot pay. If I stayed that time with you, I should come back to find him a beggar — or obliged to throw himself upon Veronica's mercy and charity for his daily bread and for a roof to cover him."

"There is one other way," said the priest, thoughtfully. "There is one thing left for you to do, if you have courage to do it. And you know better

than I what chance there would be of success. It is what I should do myself. It is a heroic remedy, but it may save everything yet."

Bosio's eyes turned anxiously to his friend, by way of question.

"Find Veronica alone," said Don Teodoro. "Take all rights into your own hands and tell her everything, just as you have told me. You know her well. If she is kind-hearted, as I think she is, she will pay your brother's debts, take over the estates herself, since it is time, and manage that Cardinal Campodonico shall never suspect that there has been anything wrong with the administration. If she is not so charitable as to do that of her own free will, why then, since you believe it, tell her that she must do it to save her life. It is most unlikely that she will refuse and take refuge with the cardinal in order to bring public disgrace upon her father's sister. And even that, horrible as it seems to you — if it must be, it will be, and it will not be your fault —"

"But Matilde —" Bosio began in troubled tones. "And yet, perhaps, it is possible. Veronica would not be so cruel as to ruin them — the money is nothing to her. And, after all, she will hardly feel the loss out of her immense fortune. Yes —" his face brightened slowly with the rays of hope. "Yes — it may be possible, after all. I had thought of going to her, but not of telling her the whole

truth. It did not seem as though I could, until I had heard myself tell it to you. It will be hard, but it seems possible, and it will save her — and then —"

His face changed again, as he broke off in the sentence, and his melancholy eyes turned slowly to his friend.

"And then," said Don Teodoro, "perhaps you will go back with me to Muro, and rest and forget it all."

"Yes," answered Bosio, sadly and dreamily, "perhaps I shall go to Muro with you. I wonder," he continued, after a short pause, "that you should want such a man as I am in your priest's house there."

"Oh! I am glad of a little society when I can get it, and I have much to show you which might interest you. I have worked perpetually for many years, since we used to talk about my history of the Church."

He checked himself. In spite of all he had just heard, and the real distress and sympathy he had felt for Bosio, the one of his dominant passions which was uppermost just then had almost made him forget everything, and launch into an account of his work and studies. Men who, intellectually, are deeply engrossed in one matter, and who, socially, have long lived very lonely lives, are not generally able to lose themselves in sympathy

for others. As Bosio was not exactly an object for Don Teodoro's charity, he was in some danger of being made a listener for the outpouring of the priest's tremendous intellectual enthusiasm. But the latter checked himself. The things he had heard were indeed of a nature not so easily forgotten. He went back to them at once.

"My dear Bosio," he began again, "do not put yourself down as the worst of men. It is just as bad to go too far in one direction as in the other. There is undoubtedly, in theory, the man in the world, at any given moment, who must be a little worse than any other living man; but though he might be our next-door neighbour, we have no means whatever of knowing that he is the greatest sinner alive, because we do not know all about all existing sinners. Consequently, and for the same reason, no man has any right to assume that he is worst of men. And as far as that goes, many men have done worse things, even in the religious view, than you have done, and very much worse things, in the opinion of society. You are not responsible for all that the others have done. You are only responsible in the immediate future for your share of duty, in doing the wisest and best thing which may present itself. And if you can induce Donna Veronica to forgive your brother and your brother's wife, by telling her the truth without prevarication, you will have done something to atone for the

past evil which you cannot undo. I am not preaching to you, my dear friend. Pray look upon me as a man and not as a priest. Indeed, I would rather that you should never think of me as a priest at all. If you need spiritual help, there are many better men than I, who can give it to you. But as a man and a friend, come to me if you will. You are to me also a man and a friend, and not a penitent."

He finished speaking, took off his spectacles, and rested his head against the wall behind him, as Bosio had done, and the younger man glanced sideways at his friend's extraordinary profile. Its fantastic outline had a moral effect upon him; for it recalled, as nothing else could, the early days of his life before he had been what he now was, when he had known what hope meant, and had understood aspirations in others which had no meaning for him now. He was very grateful, too, for Don Teodoro's words, which certainly comforted him in a way he had not expected.

"Thank you," he said, "I will think of it. I think I shall take your advice and speak to Veronica. She can save us all, if she will."

"Yes," said Don Teodoro. "She can save you all — and she will."

Then they sat a long time in silence in their corner, and the priest's mind wandered occasionally to the thought of his manuscript, and of the many

points he intended to discuss with his friend Don Matteo, a man as learned as himself, but indolent instead of active, one of those passive, living treasuries of thought upon which the active worker fastens greedily when he has a chance, to extract all the riches he can in the shortest possible time, in any shape, to carry the gold away with him to his workshop and fashion it to his wish.

And Bosio, whose intelligence was essentially dramatic and given to throwing future interviews into an imaginary dramatic shape, thought over and over what he would say to Veronica and what she might be expected to say to him. But he was terribly exhausted and harassed, and by degrees as the stimulant of recent comfort lost its cheering warmth within him, he silently grew despondent again within himself, and his dramatic fancies of fear became near and tragic realities. He thought he could hear the clear, bell-like voice of the somnambulist telling him that he should be forced to marry Veronica.

At last, realizing that he was probably detaining Don Teodoro, he roused himself, and the two went out together into the broad light of the Piazza San Ferdinando.

"I will go home," Bosio said. "I will think of it all. At this time I can easily be alone with Veronica."

His voice sounded as though he were speaking to

himself, and his head was bent, so that he stooped from the neck as Don Teodoro did. But the latter, as he walked, his silver-rimmed spectacles balanced on his great nose, thrust his bent head more forward. Or rather, it was as though his head moved first in the direction he meant to follow, while his thin legs had difficulty in keeping up with it.

Bosio was willing to put off the moment of going home as long as possible, and he accompanied his friend to the door of Don Matteo's lodging, which was in a clean, quiet, sunlit street, behind the Piazza — in one of those oases of light and cleanliness upon which one sometimes comes in the heart of Naples. The little green door was reached by a couple of steps up from the level of the street. Don Teodoro had a key and stood on the upper step, holding it in his hand and blinking in the warm sunshine.

"You know this house," he said. "You have been to see me here once or twice. If you want me, you can always send for me in the afternoon, for I only go out in the morning. But I will come and see you. When? To-morrow, before noon?"

"Yes," Bosio answered. "By to-morrow at midday something will be decided."

They shook hands and parted, Bosio turning eastward in the direction of his home. The priest absently tried to insert the key in the lock of the door, while his eyes followed his friend to the

corner of the street. Then, as Bosio's still graceful figure disappeared, he turned from the keyhole with a sigh, and let himself in.

Bosio walked rapidly at first, and then more slowly as he came nearer to the old quarter in which the Palazzo Macomer was situated. As with all men of such character, his irresolution increased just when he fancied that he was about to do something decisive. He would not have hesitated in the same way, if he had been called upon to face a physical danger; for though he was certainly no hero, he was by no means a physical coward, and in a quarrel he would have stood up bravely enough to face his antagonist. But this was very different. He had been ruled by Matilde Macomer through many years, and when he thought of meeting her he had a deadly presentiment of assured defeat. She would extract from him something more than the silent assent which he had been forced into giving on the previous evening, and she could not let him go till he promised to marry Veronica. He walked more slowly, as he felt the fear and uncertainty twisting his scant courage from his heart.

Then he was ashamed of himself, and in a sudden attempt to be brave he hailed a passing cab and drove rapidly to the Palazzo Macomer. He asked for Veronica and was told that she was in her room. He did not wish to send her a message. Gregorio

had gone out immediately after the midday breakfast. Bosio was glad of that. He had not seen his brother since the previous evening, and he did not wish to see him alone. There were monstrous wrongs on both sides, and it was better to pretend mutual ignorance, and keep up the ghastly farce, pretending that nothing was the matter. The very smallest incautious word would crack the swaying bubble that was blown to bursting with hell's breath.

Bosio had entered the main apartments in order to inquire for Veronica, had passed through the long outer hall with its red walls, its matted floor and its great table covered with green baize, to the antechamber within, where, with some ostentation, as Bosio had always thought, Gregorio had hung up the escutcheon with the quartered arms of Macomer and Serra, flanked by half a dozen big old family portraits on either side, opposite the three windows. He had waited there until the footman returned after looking for Veronica in the drawing-room, and when he heard that she was not there, he turned to reach the staircase again and go up to his own bachelor's quarters, for he feared to meet Matilde and hoped to put off seeing her until dinner-time, when he might so manœuvre as not to be left alone with her.

But the footman had hardly delivered his answer, and Bosio was in the act of turning, when one of

the two masked doors under the pictures opened suddenly, and Matilde spoke into the room, calling him by name. He turned pale and stopped short, as though a cold hand had taken him by the throat. The footman went out to the hall, as Bosio met Matilde's eyes.

"Come," she said briefly, "I want to speak to you."

He obeyed silently, and followed her through the narrow door and through a passage beyond, to her own morning-room. Matilde shut the door. The afternoon sun streamed in through two high windows, filling every corner with light and turning the crimson carpet blood red, where Matilde stood, all round her feet and the folds of her loose dark gown, so that she seemed to rise out of a pool of vivid colour, a dark, strong figure with the brightness all behind her and the gleam of her eyes just lightening in the shadow of her face.

"Why did you go out without seeing me this morning?" she asked in a hard tone. "And why did Taquisara come to see you early? You scarcely know him —"

"I certainly did not send for him," said Bosio, uneasily.

"He did not come for nothing," retorted Matilde. "He is no friend of yours. He must have come for some particular reason."

Bosio said nothing, but turned from her and

moved towards a table covered with books. In an objectless way he opened a volume and looked at the title page. Matilde followed him with her eyes.

"Well?" she said presently, "I am waiting. What did Taquisara have to say? He is Gianluca's friend — he came with a message. That is clear. What did he say? I am waiting to hear."

"He came because he chose to come," answered Bosio, still looking at the title page of the book. "Gianluca did not send him. He wished to know whether it were true that I was to marry Veronica."

"I thought so. And what did you answer? Of course you told him that it was quite settled."

"We had a long conversation — I do not remember all that we said —"

"You do not remember whether you told him that you were to marry Veronica or not?" Matilde laughed angrily and came forward.

"Let that book alone!" she said imperiously. "Look at me — so — now tell me the truth!"

She laid her hand upon his arm, and not gently, and she made him turn to her. Bosio felt that shock of shame which smites a man in the back, as it were, when a woman is too strong for him and orders him brutally to do her will.

"I told him the truth," he answered, and his pale cheeks reddened with futile anger.

"The truth!" Matilde's face darkened. "What? What did you tell him?"

Bosio was weakly glad to have frightened her a little.

"The truth," he said, trying to assume a certain indifference. "Just that. I let him understand that nothing is definitely settled yet, and that there is no contract —"

Matilde was silent, and her eyes seemed to draw nearer together, while the smooth red lips curled scornfully.

"Oh, what a coward you are!" she cried in a low voice, in deep disgust, and as she spoke she dropped his arm in contempt, though she still held his face with her angry gaze.

"You have no right to call me a coward," answered Bosio, defending his manhood. "I told you that I could not do it. The man put it in such a way that I had to give him a definite answer. For your sake I would not deny the engagement altogether —"

"For my sake!" exclaimed Matilde. "Do not use such phrases to me. They mean nothing. For some wretched quibble of your miserable conscience — as you still have the assumption to call it — you will ruin us in another day."

"Yes, I still have some conscience," replied Bosio, trying to be bold under her scornful eyes. "I would not let Taquisara think that you and Gregorio had lied, and I would not lie myself —"

"You are reforming, then? You choose the moment well!"

"I have told you what passed between Taquisara and me," said Bosio. "That was what you wished to know. I will judge of myself whether I did right or not."

He turned from her and walked away, towards the door.

"Well?" she said, not moving, for she knew that her voice would stop him.

"Is there anything else?" he asked, turning again and standing still.

"There is much more. Come back! Sit down and talk to me like a sensible being. There is much to be said. The matter is all but settled in spite of the account which Taquisara frightened you into giving him. I like that man, he is so brave! He is not at all like you."

"If you wish me to stay longer, you must not insult me again," said Bosio, not yet seating himself, but resting his hands on the back of a chair as he stood. "You know very well that I am no more a coward, if it comes to fighting men, than others are. One need not be cowardly to dread doing such a thing as you are trying to force me to."

"It does not seem such a very terrible thing," said Matilde, her tone suddenly changing and growing thoughtful. "It really does not seem to me such a dreadful thing that you should be Ve-

ronica's husband. Of course I do not speak of the material advantages. You were always an idealist, Bosio — you do not care for those things, and I daresay that when you are married you will not even care to take her titles, nor to spend much of her money. I know well enough what passes in your mind. Sit down. Let us talk about it. We cannot afford to quarrel, you and I, can we? I am sorry I spoke as I did — and I never meant that you were cowardly in the ordinary sense. I was angry about Taquisara. What right had he to come here, to pry into our affairs? I should think you would have resented it, too."

"I did," said Bosio, somewhat sullenly. "But I could not turn him out, nor get into a quarrel with him. It would have made a useless scandal and would have set every one talking."

"Certainly," assented Matilde. "Perhaps you did right, after all — at least, you thought you did. I am sure of that. I do not know why I was so angry at you. I am unstrung, and nervous, I suppose. Did I say very dreadful things to you, dear? I do not know what I said —"

"You called me a coward several times," replied Bosio, thinking to show a little strength by relenting slowly.

"Oh! but I did not mean it!" cried the countess. "Bosio, forgive me. I did not mean to say such things — indeed, I did not. But do you

wonder that I am nervous? Say that you forgive me —".

"Of course I forgive you," answered Bosio, raising his eyebrows rather wearily. "I know that you are under a terrible strain — but you say things sometimes which are unjust and hard. I know what all this means to us both — but there must be some other way."

Matilde shook her head mournfully, as Bosio sat down beside her, already sinking back to his long-learned docility.

"There is no other way," she said. "There is certainly none, that is sure. I have thought it all over, as one thinks of everything when everything is in danger. The only other course is to throw ourselves upon Veronica's mercy —"

"Well? Why not?" asked Bosio, eagerly, as Don Teodoro's advice gained instant plausibility again. "She is kind, she is charitable, she will forgive everything and save you —"

"The shame of it, Bosio! Of confessing it all — and she may refuse. Veronica is not all kindness and charity. She is a Serra, as I am, and though she is a mere girl, if she takes it into her head to be hard and unforgiving, there would be no power on earth that could move her. She is not so unlike me, Bosio. You may think so because she is so unlike me in looks. She has the type of her father, poor Tommaso. But we Serra

are all Serra — there is not much difference. No — do not interrupt me, dear. And as for your marriage, there is much to be said for it. It is time that you were married, you know. You and I have lived our lives, and we are not what we were. I shall always be fond of you — we shall always be more than friends — but always less than what we have been. It must have come sooner or later, Bosio, and it may as well come now. You know — we cannot be always young. And as for me, if I am not already old, I soon shall be."

The woman who had held him so long knew how to tempt him, sacrificing everything in the desperate straits to which she was reduced. Though he had loved her well, and sinfully, but truly, for so many years, his love had sometimes seemed an unbearable thraldom, to escape from which he would have given his heart piecemeal, though he should lose all the happiness life held for him, for the sake of a momentary freedom. Possibly, too, she knew that he never longed for that freedom so much as when she had just been most violent and despotic. She was prepared for the feeble dissent with which he answered her suggestion of separation. He would be the more easily persuaded to yield and marry Veronica.

"As for your being old," he said, "it is absurd. It is I who have grown old of late. But our being friends —" he paused thoughtfully.

"A man is never too old to marry," answered Matilde. "It is only women who grow too old to be loved. You will begin your life all over again with Veronica. You and she will go away together — you can live in Rome, when you are tired of Paris. It will be better. You and I will see each other seldom at first. By and by it will be so easy for us to be good friends after we have been separated some time."

"Friends?" Bosio spoke the one word again, with a sad and dreamy intonation.

"I asked Veronica this morning," continued Matilde, not heeding him, and beginning to speak more rapidly. "You have no idea how very fond she is of you. When I spoke of the marriage, she seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world. She found arguments for it herself."

"She?"

"Yes. She said — what I have said to you — that there was no man whom she knew so well and liked so much as you, that of course she had never thought of marrying you, nor, indeed, of being married at all, but that, at the same time, she should think that you would make a very good husband. She wished to think of it — that is as much as to say that she will not even make any serious objections. You have no idea how young girls feel about marriage, Bosio. How should you? You cannot comprehend the horror a girl

like Veronica feels of a stranger, of a man like Gianluca, even, whom she has met half a dozen times and talked with. It seems so dreadful to think of spending a lifetime with a man about whom she knows nothing, or next to nothing. And yet it is the custom, and most of them accept it and are happy. But the idea of marrying some one with whom she is really intimate, whom she really likes, who really understands her, places marriage in a new light for a young girl. Without knowing it, Veronica is half in love with you. It is no wonder that she likes the thought of being your wife — apart from the fact that you are a very desirable husband."

"I cannot believe that," said Bosio.

"That you are desirable as a husband? My dear Bosio, do not pretend to be so absurdly modest! Any woman would be glad to marry you. But for me, you could have made the best match in Naples years ago —"

"Not even years ago. Much less now. But that was not what I meant. I cannot believe that Veronica is really inclined to marry me. It seems to me that she might be my daughter —"

"If you had been married at fifteen," suggested Matilde, laughing softly. "Because you feel tired and harassed to-day, you feel a hundred years old. It is no compliment to me to say so, for I am even a little older than you, I think. And you — you

are young, you are handsome, you are talented, you have the manners that women love —"

"It is not many minutes since you were saying that we were both growing old —"

"No, no! I said that we could not always be young. That is very different. And that we have lived our lives — our lives so long as they can be lived together — that is what I meant. You are young! How many men marry at fifty! And you are not forty yet. You have ten years of youth before you. That is not the question. So far as that is concerned, say that you are old to-night, at dinner, and you shall see how Veronica will laugh at you! But that you and I should part, Bosio — and yet, it is far better, if you have the courage."

"Have you?" he asked sadly.

"Yes — I have, for your sake, since I see how you look at this. And you are right. I know you are, though I am only a woman, and cannot have a man's ideas about honour. For my own part — well, I am a woman, and I have loved you long. But you are the one to be thought of. You shall be free, as though I had never lived. You shall be able to say to yourself that in marrying Veronica you are not doing anything in the least dishonourable. I shall not exist for you. I shall not feel that I have the right to think of you and for you as I always have. I shall never ask you to do anything for me, lest you should feel that I were

asserting some claim to you, as though you were still mine. It will be hard at first. But I can do it, and I will do it, in order that your conscience may be free. You shall marry her, as though you had never known me, and hereafter I will always be the same. Only — " She fixed her eyes upon him with a look which, whether genuine or assumed, was fierce and tender —

"Only — if you are not true to her, Bosio — if you leave her and go after some other woman — then I will turn upon you!"

Bosio met her glance with a look of something like astonishment, wondering how in a few sentences she had got herself into a position to threaten him with vengeance if he were unfaithful to Veronica.

"We will not speak of that," she exclaimed before he said anything in answer or protest. "We have harder things to do than to imagine evil in the future. Since we are decided — since it is to be the end — let it be now, quickly! You shall not have it on your mind that you belong to me in any way, from now. No — you are right — you must feel free. You must feel free, besides really being free. You must feel, when you speak to Veronica to-night or to-morrow, as she expects you to speak, that all our life together is utterly past and swept away, and that I only exist henceforth as a relative — as — as your wife's aunt, Bosio!"

She laughed, half-bitterly, half-nervously, at the idea, and turning away her face she held out her hand to him.

He took it, and held it, pressing it between both his own.

"Do you mean this, Matilde?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes, I mean it," she answered, speaking away from him with averted face.

He could not see, but she was biting her lip till it almost bled. In her own strange way she loved him with all her evil nature, and if she were breaking with him now, it was to save herself from something worse than death. It was the hardest thing she had ever done. He hesitated: there was the mean prompting of the spirit, to take her at her word and to set himself free, since she offered him freedom, caring not whether she might repent to-morrow; and there was the instinct of fidelity which in so much dishonour had remained with him through so many years.

"Besides," she said hoarsely, "I do not love you any more. I would not keep you longer, if I could. Oh — we shall be friends! But the other — no! Good bye, Bosio — good bye."

Something moved him, as she had not meant that anything should.

"I do not believe you," he said. "You love me still — I will not leave you!"

"No, no! I do not — but if you still care at all, save me. Say good bye, but do the rest also. You are free now. You are an honourable man again. Bosio, look at my hair. You used to love it. Would you have it cut off and cropped by the convict's shears? My hands that you are holding — dear — would you love them galled by the irons, riveted upon them for years? Save me, Bosio! You are free now — save me, for the dear sake of all that has been!"

Still she turned her face away, and as Bosio saw the waving richness of her brown hair and heard her words, he felt a desperate thrust of pain in his heart. It was all so fearfully true and possible.

"But do not say that you do not love me," he pleaded, in low tones, bending to her ear.

There was a moment's silence, and he thought he saw a convulsive movement of her throat — he guessed it rather than saw it.

"It is true!" she cried, with an effort, drawing her hands from him and turning her pale face fiercely. "If I loved you still, do you think I would give you to Veronica Serra, or to any living woman? Was that the way I loved you? Was that how you loved me?"

"Ah no! But now —"

She would not let him speak.

"Do you think that if I loved you, as I have loved you — as I did once — I should be so ready

to give you up? Do you know me so little? Do you think that I have no pride?" asked Matilde Macomer, holding him at arm's length from her with her strong hands and throwing back her head, while the lids half veiled her eyes, and her face grew paler still.

The words that were so strange, spoken by such a woman, fell from her lips with force and earnest conviction, whether she truly believed that they had meaning for her, or not. Then her voice changed and softened again.

"But your friend — yes, always, as you must be mine — that and nothing more. We have said good bye to all the rest — now go, for I would rather be alone for a little while. Go, Bosio — please go!"

"As you will," he answered.

Then he kissed her hand and looked into her face for a moment, as though expecting that she should speak again. But she only shook her head, and her hand gave his no pressure. He kissed it again. There were tears in his eyes when he left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

Love is not the privilege of the virtuous, nor the exclusive right of the weak man and woman. The earth brings forth the good thing and the bad thing with equal strength to grow great and multiply side by side, and it is not the privilege of the good thing to live forever because it is good, nor is it the condemnation of the bad to die before its time, perishing in its own evil.

A moment after Bosio had left the room, Matilde rose to her feet, very pale and unsteady, and locked the door. Then, as though she were groping her way in darkness, she got back to the sofa, and falling upon it, buried her face in the cushions, and bit them, lest she should cry out. She felt that it would have been easier, after all, to have killed Veronica Serra, than it had been to part with the one thing she had loved in her life.

She had not loved him better than herself, perhaps, since it was to save herself that she had driven him away. But it had not been to save herself from so small and insignificant a thing as death, though she was vital and loved life for its own sake. She had not realized, either, until it

had been almost done, how necessary it was. Yesterday she had been more cynical. Her own wickedness was teaching her the necessity of some good, and she saw now clearly that Bosio was one degree less base than herself. She believed that he would now be willing to marry Veronica, but she understood that until now he would not have done it — unless she had freed him from the galling remnant of his own conscience, and had formally given him his liberty. To give him that, in order that he might save her, she had torn out her heart by the roots.

The bitterest of all was this, that he had scarcely struggled against her will, when she had left him to himself. He had said a few words, indeed, but he could hardly have said less, if he had meant nothing. She knew well enough that at almost any point she could have brought him back, playing upon the fidelity of habit. At her voice, at her glance, for one word of her pleading, he would have come back to her feet, willing to remain. But there was no vital strength of passion in him to keep him to her against her mere spoken will. Once or twice, in spite of herself, her voice had softened; she had felt that her face betrayed her, and had turned it away; she had known that her hands were icy cold in his, and had hoped that he would not notice it and understand, and feel, perhaps, that his accursed habit of fidelity would not

let him take the freedom she thrust upon him. He had not seen, he had not felt, he had noticed nothing; and he was gone, glad to be free from her at last, willing to marry another woman, ready to forget what had held him by a thread which he respected, but not by a bond which he could not break. She had long guessed how it was; she knew it now — she had known the truth last night, when she had smoothed his soft hair with her hand and had spoken softly to him, but had not got from him the promise that meant salvation to her and her husband. Then she had known what she must do. Once more she had tried to impose her strength upon his weakness, and had failed. Then, almost without an outward sign, she had made up her mind. And now — he was gone. That was all she knew, or remembered, for an hour, as she lay there on the sofa, biting the cushions. It would have been far easier to kill Veronica, than to let him go. It was not her conscience that suffered, but her heart, and it could suffer still.

It would have been worse, had that been possible, if she had known what Bosio felt at that moment. Happily for her, she never knew. For in the midst of the life-and-death terror of the situation, he was conscious that he rejoiced at being unexpectedly free at last from the slavery of her power. It was perhaps the satisfaction of an

aspiration, good in itself, of a long-smouldering revolt against the life of deception she had imposed upon him; but in respect of his manhood, it was mean. For good is what men are, when they are doing good. It cannot be the good itself, which, though it profit many, may be so done as to stab and wound the secret enemy of the man's own heart. The good such a man does the whole world is but the knife in his hand wherewith to hurt the one. But Bosio hurt only himself, and little, at that, for he was almost past hurting; and Matilde never knew what he felt. And though he suffered most of all, perhaps, between the beginning and the end, there was no one moment of all his suffering which was like the agony of the strong and evil woman when she had driven him away, and was quite alone. She knew, now, what it meant to be alone.

When she rose at last, her face was changed; there was a keen, famished look in her eyes, and her movements were steady and direct. Her nature was very unlike Bosio's, for she was able to drive her will into action, as it were, and she could be sure that it would not turn and bend, and disappoint her. But, for the present, she could do little more, and she knew it. She could only hope that all things might go well, standing ready at hand to throw her weight upon the scale-beam if fate alone would not bear down the side that bore her safety.

She had said all that she could say to Veronica and to Bosio. Gregorio Macomer, her husband, whom she hated and despised, but whom she was saving, or trying to save, with herself, carried the effrontery of his sham-honest face and cold manner through it all, unmoved, so far as she could see. Only once or twice in the course of the day he had laughed suddenly and nervously, with a contraction of the face and a raising of the flat upper lip that showed his sharp yellow teeth. No one noticed it but Matilde, and it frightened her. But hitherto he had said nothing more since he had first confided to her, as to his only possible helper, the nature of his danger.

She had not reproached him with what he had done. The danger itself was too great for that, and perhaps she had suspected its approach too long to be surprised at his confession. She had paid very little attention to the words he used; for, considering his nature, it was natural that he should, even in such extremity, attempt to throw a side-light of dignity upon his misfortunes, and should call crimes by names which suggested honest dealing to the ordinary hearer, such as 'transference of title,' 'reinvestment,' 'realization,' and the like; all of which, in plain language, meant that he had taken what was not his, without the shadow of authorization from any one, in the quite indefensible way which the law calls 'stealing.'

Matilde had been amazed, however, at the impunity he had hitherto enjoyed. The mere fact that the estate had never been handed over by the guardians, of whom she was one and Cardinal Campodonico the third, was probably in itself actionable, had Veronica chosen to protest; and it was an indubitable fact that Gregorio Macomer had taken large sums after the guardianship had legally expired. There had been none to hinder him and Lamberto Squarci from doing as they pleased. The cardinal was deeply engaged in other matters, and was, moreover, not at all a man of business. He believed Gregorio to be honest, and now and then, when he talked with Veronica, he applauded her wisdom in leaving the management of her affairs in such experienced hands.

Matilde unlocked her door when she felt that she was once more mistress of herself and able to face the world. A woman does not lead the life she had led for years without at least knowing herself well and understanding exactly how far she can rely upon her face and voice. She knew when she rose from the sofa that she could go through the remainder of the day well enough; and though her eyes gleamed hungrily, there was a cynical smile on her lips as she turned over the red cushion, on which there were marks where she had bitten it, and softly unlocked the door. She went into her dressing-room, beyond, for a moment, to smooth

her hair. That was all, for there had been no tears in her eyes.

When she returned, she was surprised to see her husband standing before the window, with his back to the broad sunshine, peacefully smoking a cigarette. The smoke curled lazily about his grey head, in the quiet air, as he allowed it to issue from his parted lips almost without the help of his breath. His face was like stone, but as he opened his mouth to let out the wreathing smoke, his lips smiled in an unnatural way. Matilde half unconsciously compared him to one of those grimacing Chinese monsters of grey porcelain, made for burning incense and perfumes, from whose stony jaws the thick smoke comes out on the right and left in slowly curling strings. His expression did not change when he saw her, and as he stood with his back to the light, his small eyes were quite invisible in his face.

"What news?" he asked calmly, as he closed the door and came forward into the room. "Is all going well?"

His breath, as he spoke, blew the clouds of smoke from his face in thin puffs.

"If you wish things to go well," answered Matilde, "leave everything to me. Do not interfere. You have an unlucky hand."

She sat down in the corner of the sofa, taking a book from the table, but not yet opening it. He smoked in silence for a moment.

"Yes," he said, presently. "I have been unfortunate. But I have great confidence in you, Matilde — great confidence."

"That is fortunate," replied his wife, coldly. "It would be hard, if there were no confidence on either side."

"Yes. Of course, you have none in me?"

He laughed suddenly, and the sound was jarring and startling, like the unexpected breaking of plates in a quiet room. Matilde's lips quivered and her brow contracted spasmodically. She hated his voice at all times, as she hated him and all that belonged to him and his being; but during the past twenty-four hours he had developed this strange laugh which set her teeth on edge every time she heard it.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked impatiently. "Why do you laugh in that way?"

"Did I laugh?" he inquired, by way of answer. "It was unconscious. But my voice was never musical. However, in the present state of our family affairs, a little laughter might divert our thoughts. Have you seen Bosio to-day? Why did he not come to luncheon? I hope he is not ill, just at this moment."

Matilda 'placed' her voice carefully, as a singer would do, before she answered.

"He is not ill," she said. "He was here an hour ago. I did not ask him why he did not come to luncheon, because it did not concern me."

"Well? And the rest?"

"The rest? How anxious you are!" she exclaimed scornfully. "The rest is as well as ill can be. I think he will marry Veronica."

"I should suppose so, if she will marry him," observed Macomer. "It would be as sensible to doubt that a starving man would take bread, as to question whether a poor man will accept a fortune, especially in such an agreeable shape. It is quite another matter, whether the fortune will give itself to the poor man. What does Veronica say? Is she pleased with the idea?"

"Moderately. She has not refused. She wishes to think about it."

"I hope that she will not think too long. To-day is the tenth of December. There are just three weeks. By the bye, Matilde, I hope you have put the will in a safe place. Where is it?"

Matilde paused two seconds before she answered. Though she could not imagine in what way Gregorio could improve his desperate position by getting the will out of her hands, nor by tampering with it, of which she knew him to be quite capable, yet, on general principles, she distrusted him so wholly and profoundly that she determined to deceive him as to the place in which she kept it. Being clever at concealing things, she began by showing it to him. She rose, took a key from behind a photograph on the mantelpiece, and unlocked the drawer

of her writing-table. The will lay there, folded in a big envelope.

"Here it is," she said. "Do you wish to look over it again?"

She drew it half out of the cover and held it up before him. He recognized the document and seemed satisfied.

"Oh! no," he answered. "I know it by heart. I only wished to know where it was."

"Very well; it is here," said Matilde, putting it back and locking the drawer again. "I generally carry the key about with me," she added carelessly, "but I have no pocket in this gown, so I laid it behind that photograph. It is not a very good place for it, is it?"

She hesitated, holding the key in her hand, and looking about the room while he watched her. The woman's enormous power of deception showed itself in the spontaneous facility with which she went through a complicated little scene, quite improvised, in order to mislead her husband. She knew that he himself would suggest some place for the key to lie in.

"Put it under the edge of the carpet in the corner near the door," he suggested. "You can easily turn the carpet up a little between the rings."

"That is a good idea," she said. "It is as well that you should know where it is, in case anything were to happen to me."

She was already in the corner, and she thrust the key under the doubled edge of the crimson carpet.

"You are ingenious," she observed drily, as she rose to her feet. "I should not have thought of that. It is a pity that you have not been able to apply your ingenuity better in other ways, too. It has been wasted."

"I am not sure," answered Macomer, thoughtfully. "If Bosio marries Veronica, our position will be a very good one, considering the misfortunes through which we have passed. If he should not, and if Veronica should die, it will be much better. I am not sure but that, if I had no affection for the girl, I might prefer that she should die."

Matilde glanced at him sideways, uneasily.

"We will not speak of that," she said, as though it were a disagreeable subject.

"No."

Then, without warning, his jarring, crashing laughter filled the room again for a moment, and she started as she heard it, and looked round nervously.

"I really wish you would not laugh in that way," she said, with a frown. "There is nothing to laugh at, I assure you."

"I did not know that I laughed," said Macomer, indifferently. "That is the second time in a quarter of an hour. How odd it would be if I were to laugh unconsciously in that way when—" He seemed to check the words that were coming.

"When, for instance?" asked Matilde, not guessing what was passing in his mind.

"At the funeral," he answered shortly. Matilde started again, and looked at him anxiously. She had resumed her seat after she had hidden the key, but she now rose and went to him. He was still standing before the window, though he had finished his cigarette and had thrown away the end of it. She stood before him a moment before she spoke, fixing her eyes severely on his face.

"Control yourself!" she said sternly. "I understand that you are nervous and over-strained. That is no reason for behaving like a fool."

He also paused an instant before speaking. Then, all at once, his features assumed an expression of docility, not at all natural to him.

"Yes," he answered, "I will try. I think you are quite right. I really am very much over-strained in these days."

Matilde was surprised by his change of manner, but was glad to find that she could control him so easily.

"It will pass," she said more gently. "You will be better in a day or two, when everything is settled."

"Yes — when everything is settled. But meanwhile, my dear, perhaps it would be better, if you should notice anything strange in my behaviour, like my laughing in this absurd way, for instance,

just to look at me without saying anything — you understand — it will recall me to myself. I am convinced that it is only absence of mind, brought on by great anxiety. But people are spiteful, you know, and somebody might think that I was losing my mind."

"Yes," she answered gravely. "If you laugh in that way, without any reason, somebody might think so. I will try and call your attention to it, if I can."

"Thank you," said Macomer, with his unpleasant smile. "I think I will go and lie down now, for I feel tired."

He turned from her, and made a few steps towards the door. He did not walk like a man tired, for he held himself as erect as ever, with his head thrown back, and his narrow shoulders high and square. Nevertheless, Matilde was anxious.

"You do not feel ill, do you?" she asked, before he had reached the door.

He stopped, half turning back.

"No — oh, no! I do not feel ill. Pray do not be anxious, my dear. I will take a little aconite for my heart, and then I will lie down for an hour or two."

"I did not know that you had been converted to homœopathy," said Matilde, indifferently. "But, of course, if it does you good, take the aconite, by all means."

"I do not take it in homœopathic doses," answered Gregorio. "It is the tincture, and I sometimes take as much as thirty or forty drops of it in water. Of course, that would be too much for a person not used to taking it. But it is a very good medicine. Indeed, I should advise you to take it, too, if you ever have any trouble with your heart."

"How does it affect one?" asked Matilde, turning her face from him, and speaking indifferently.

"It lowers the action of the heart. Of course, one has to be careful. I suppose that one or two hundred drops would stop the heart altogether, but a little of it is excellent for palpitations. Do you suffer from them? Should you like some? I have a large supply, for I always use it. I can give you a small bottle, if you like."

"No," answered Matilde, still looking away from him, towards the photographs on the mantelpiece. "I am afraid of those things. They get into the system, as arsenic does, and mercury, and such things."

"Not at all," said Macomer. "You are quite mistaken. That is the peculiarity of those vegetable — those strong vegetable medicines. They are quite untraceable in the system, and altogether defy chemistry."

Matilde was silent a moment.

"Well," she answered, with an air of indifference, "I have a tendency to a little palpitation of the

heart, and if you will give me a bottle of your medicine, I will try it once. It can do no harm, I suppose."

"Not in small quantities. I will bring it to you by and by."

"Very well."

He went out, and a moment later she heard his dreadful laugh outside. In an instant she reached the door, opened it, and called after him: —

"Gregorio! Do not laugh!"

But he was gone, and there was no one in the passage.

CHAPTER VIII.

Veronica did not appear at dinner that evening, but remained in her room, sending word to the countess that she had a headache and wished to be alone. Matilde thought it not unnatural that the girl should wish to reflect in solitude upon the grave problem which had been given her for consideration. It would be wiser, too, not to disturb her, but to leave her to herself to reach her own conclusions. Matilde knew that Veronica had considerable gifts of contrariety, and that it would be a mistake to press her too closely for a definite answer. Besides, it was always a tradition in such cases that a young girl should have, in name at least, perfect independence of action, and the ultimate right to refuse an offer or accept it.

It was hard to sit still at the dinner table and behave with an appearance of being reasonable, while knowing that the fate of the household depended upon the answer of the young girl — from the personal liberty of two out of the three persons who sat at the meal, to the disposal of the forks and spoons with which they were eating, and the roof over their heads. It was very hard even to

make a pretence of swallowing a little food, when all three knew the truth, and none dared to refer to it in any way lest the servants should guess at what was taking place. They spent a terribly uncomfortable hour in one another's society. The two men exchanged indifferent remarks. Matilde occasionally said something, but her mind ran constantly on absurd details, such as the incident of the hiding of the will. As soon as her husband had left her, she had taken it from the drawer, relocking the latter, and again placing the key under the carpet. Then she had taken the will into her dressing-room and had hidden it temporarily in another drawer. To distract her mind during dinner, she tried to think of a better place for it, and at last determined to unscrew the wooden back of a large old silver mirror which stood on her dressing-table, and to lay the two open sheets of the document upon the back of the looking-glass. When it was all screwed up again, it would not be easy to find Veronica's will. Matilde also thought of the aconite which Gregorio had recommended her to keep, and of where she could put it, out of the way of the servants.

Once, towards the end of dinner, Gregorio's terrifying laugh broke out suddenly, as the butler was offering him something. The man started back a little and stared, and the spoon and fork clattered to the ground over the edge of the silver

dish. Bosio started, too, but Matilde fixed her eyes sternly on Gregorio's face. He saw that she looked at him, and he nodded, suddenly assuming the expression of docility she had noticed for the first time in the afternoon.

Before they left the table they were all three in that excruciating state of rawness of the nerves, in which a man has the sensation that his brain is a violent explosive which a single jarring sound or word must ignite and blow to atoms, like a bomb-shell.

And all the while Veronica sat peacefully in her room, before her fire, wrapped in a loose soft dressing-gown, her little feet upon the fender before her and a book in her hand. A lamp in an upright sliding stand was on one side of her, and on the other stood a small table. From time to time her maid brought her something from dinner, of which she ate a mouthful or two between two paragraphs of her novel.

It was a great pleasure to her to dine in this way, alone, but it was one she rarely had an opportunity of indulging. Even when her aunt and uncle dined out she generally had her dinner in the dining-room with Bosio, who scarcely ever went into society at all. On such occasions they generally sat together half an hour after the meal was over, before separating, and it was then that they really enjoyed each other's conversation. It was very

rarely that Veronica yielded to her wish to be alone and pleaded a more or less imaginary indisposition in order to stay in her room. Even then, she was not quite sure of being alone for the whole evening, for Matilde sometimes came in after dinner and remained with her for half an hour. It had always been the countess's habit to show the greatest concern and consideration for her niece.

But to-night Veronica knew that she should not be disturbed; for she understood that this was to be an important epoch in her life, upon which all the future must depend, and that, since she had asked time for consideration, Matilde would not intrude upon her solitude. Knowing that she had as many hours before her as she pleased to take, she began the arduous task of self-examination by greedily reading a novel which Bosio had given her two days earlier, and which she had not opened. Somehow, she fancied that while she was reading her mind would decide itself. The immediate question was not really whether she should accept Bosio or not, but whether she should go again on the morrow to her friend Bianca Corleone, between eleven and twelve o'clock. That Gianluca della Spina would be there, she had not a doubt, and the idea of going there to meet him presented itself to her mind as a dangerous and mad adventure. If she hesitated, however, it was not on account of meeting the man who was dying of love for her,

but rather for fear of what Taquisara might think of her if she thus answered his summons to the interview. He had promised that he would not be present, and this gave her courage; but Bianca would see and understand, for Bianca had first spoken to her of Gianluca, that very morning, and as for Taquisara, he would, of course, soon know all about it from his friend.

The arguments in favour of going were very strong, since she was asked to say, at short notice, whether she would marry Bosio Macomer or not. In all that Matilde had told Bosio the elder woman had been quite right. Veronica was strongly prejudiced in his favour, and what Taquisara had managed to say in a few words about the interested nature of the proposal, not only had little weight with Veronica, but was the only point which had not pleased her in her interview with the Sicilian. After all, he had attacked her only near relatives in hinting, and more than hinting, that they wished to gain possession of her wealth. She was really ignorant of the fact that Cardinal Campodonico had so rarely even made a pretence of inquiring about the state of her fortune. She met him occasionally, and he never failed to say something pleasant to her, which she afterwards remembered. Whenever Gregorio Macomer spoke to her of business, he used the cardinal's name to give weight to his statements, and

Veronica naturally supposed that the princely prelate was informed of all that took place, and approved of everything which Macomer did. It was no wonder that she turned a deaf ear to Taquisara's warning, which, as coming from Gianluca's friend, seemed calculated purposely to influence her against marrying Bosio.

In reality, and apart from the little superficial argumentation with which Veronica had diverted her own mind during the late hours of the afternoon, she had made up her mind that before seriously considering the question of marrying Bosio, she would see Gianluca and give him just such an opportunity of speaking with her alone, as she had given his friend Taquisara. There was really much directness of understanding and purpose in her young character, together with a fair share of tenacity; for, as Matilde had told Bosio, Veronica was a Serra, which was at least equivalent to saying that she was not an insignificant person of weak will and feeble intelligence. She was indeed the last of her name, but the race had not decayed. It was by accident and by force of circumstances that it had come to be represented by the solitary young girl who sat reading a novel over her fire on that evening, caring very little for the fact that she was a very great personage, related to many royal families, a Grandee of Spain and a Princess of the Holy Roman Empire, all in

her own right alone, as Veronica Serra — all of which advantages Taquisara had hastily recapitulated to her that morning. So long as she should live, the race was certainly not extinct, nor worn out; for she had as much vitality as all the tribe of the Spina family taken together. She was not, indeed, conscious of her untried strength, for she had never yet had any opportunity of using it; and in the matter of the will, which was the only one that had yet arisen in which she might have tried herself, she had yielded in the simple desire to get rid of a perpetual importunity. Beyond that she had attached very little importance to it. Her aunt might be miserly, but Veronica, in her youth and health, could not think it even faintly probable that she should die before the elder woman and leave the latter her fortune. Taquisara's hasty counsel had therefore fallen in barren ground. She scouted the idea that Gregorio Macomer had ruined himself in speculations, for she believed him to be a man of extraordinary caution, and probably something of a miser.

Taquisara had therefore not prejudiced her at all against Bosio, nor against the idea of marrying the latter. And Matilde, as has been said, was quite right in supposing that Veronica would see much in favour of the marriage.

Bosio was distinctly a desirable man for a husband. Nine women out of ten would have admitted

this without hesitation. The strongest argument against the statement seemed to lie in the fact that there were a few faintly grey streaks in his thick and silky hair. For the rest, whatever he chose to say of himself, he was still within the limits of what one may call second youth. He was only between fifteen and sixteen years older than Veronica, and such a difference of age between man and wife does not generally begin to be felt as a disadvantage until the man is nearly sixty. He was not at all a worn-out dandy, with no illusions, and no constitution to speak of; for circumstances, as well as his own sober tastes, had caused him to lead a quiet and restful life, admirably adapted to his sound but delicately organized nature. He was decidedly good-looking, especially in a city where beauty is almost the exclusive distinction of the other sex. His figure, though slightly inclined to stoutness, was still graceful, and he carried himself with a good bearing and a quiet manner, which might well pass for dignity. So much for his appearance. Intellectually, in Veronica's narrow experience of the world, he was quite beyond comparison with any one she knew. It is true that she really knew hardly any one. But her own intelligence enabled her to judge with tolerable fairness of his capacities, and she had found these varied and broadly developed, precisely in the direction of her own tastes.

Lastly, Matilde was right in counting upon the existing intimacy as a factor in the case. The idea of being suddenly betrothed to marry an almost total stranger was as strongly repugnant to Veronica as it seems to be attractive to most girls of her age and class in Southern Italy.

The fact is, perhaps, that the majority of such young girls learn to think of themselves as being sure to lead hopeless and helpless lives, unless they are married; and as very few of them possess such attractions or advantages as to make it a positive certainty that they can marry well, they grow up with the idea that it is better to take the first chance than to risk waiting for a second, which may never come. To these, marriage is a very uncertain lottery; and if they draw a prize, they are not easily persuaded to throw it back into fate's bag, and play for another. The very element of uncertainty lends excitement to the game, and they readily attribute all sorts of perfections to the imaginary stranger who is to be the partner of their lives.

But in this, Veronica's ideas were quite different. She had assuredly not been brought up in vanity and pride of station, and though naturally proud, she was not at all vain. From her childhood, however, she had received something of that sort of constant consideration which is the portion of those born to exalted fortunes. She had never had less of it, perhaps, than in her aunt's house; for the Countess

Macomer was not only of her own race and name, and therefore too near to her to show her any such little formalities of respect, but had also, as a matter of policy and with considerable tact, managed to keep the dominant position in her own house. She had shut out the little court of young friends who would very probably have gathered round her niece — acquaintances of Veronica's convent days, older than herself, but anxious enough to be called her friends — and the tribe of men, old and young, who, in the extremely complicated relationships of the Neapolitan nobility, claimed some right to be treated as cousins and connexions of the family. All these Matilde had strenuously kept away, isolating Veronica as much as possible from young people of her own age, and proportionately diminishing both the girl's power to choose a husband for herself and her appreciation of her own right to make the choice. Nevertheless, Veronica knew that she had that right, and she intended to exercise it. Unconsciously, however, her judgment had been guided towards the selection of Bosio, so that she was now by no means so free an agent as she supposed herself to be. She did not love him at all; but she liked him very much, and admired him, and since it was time for her to be married, she was strongly inclined to choose for her husband the only man of her acquaintance whom she both admired and liked.

These long and tedious explanations are necessary in order to explain how it came about that Veronica Serra, with her great position and vast estates, seriously thought of uniting herself with such a comparatively obscure personage as Count Bosio Macomer. Taquisara had very fairly described the latter's position to her that morning as that of an insignificant poor gentleman, in no point of name or fortune the superior of five hundred others, and who might naturally be supposed to covet the dignities and the wealth which Veronica could confer upon him. But Veronica had resented both the description and the suggestions which had accompanied it, which showed well enough how strong her inclination really was.

On the other side, there remained the impression made upon her by what Taquisara had said for Gianluca, and last of all the impression made upon her by Taquisara himself, as a man, and as a standard by which to measure other men in the future.

With regard to Gianluca, Veronica was indeed curious, but she was also somewhat sceptical. She could not, of course, say surely that a young man might not die of love for a girl whom he scarcely knew; and among the acquaintances of her family she remembered at least one case in converse, where a morbid maiden of eighteen years had died because she was not allowed to marry the man she loved.

Even there, it had been hinted that the girl had caught a bad cold which had fastened upon her delicate lungs. It was doubtless a romantic story, and if anything appealed to her for Gianluca, it was the romance in his case. Her reading had been very limited as yet, and the book she was reading so eagerly was a French translation of the Bride of Lammermoor. The romance of it spoke directly to her imagination; but when the book was closed she did not believe that she had a romantic disposition. It is an indisputable fact that the people to whom the strangest things happen never regard themselves as romantic characters, whatever others may think of them. They are, indeed, more often active and daring people, to whom what others think extraordinary seems quite natural and easy. They make the events out of which humanity's appetite for romance is fed, and become, to humanity, themselves the unconscious embodiments of romance itself. In her heart, therefore, Veronica was a little sceptical about the reality of the terrific passion by which, according to Taquisara, his friend was consumed. She recalled his face distinctly, as she had seen him half a dozen times in the world, and she thought the definition of him which she had given Bianca Corleone a very just one. He reminded her of one of Perugino's angels — with a youthful beard. If angels had beards, she thought, without a smile, they would have beards like Gian-

luca della Spina's, very youthful, scanty, curling, and so fair as to be almost colourless.

She remembered that he had looked at her rather sadly, and had spoken little and to no purpose, making futile remarks about juvenile amusements, and one or two harmless little jokes which she had quite forgotten, but to which he had referred at the next short meeting, at some other house, on the corner of some other similar sofa. That was all that she could call up out of her memories. She had thought him insipid. Once she remembered distinctly that while he had been talking to her, she had been watching Bianca Corleone's handsome brother, Gianforte, whom she had seen only once before, and that when her companion had asked her to agree with him, she had said 'yes,' without having the least idea of what he had been saying. He had produced only a very slight and transparent shadow amongst the figures of her recollections. It was a severe tax on her credulity to try and believe that he was dying for love of her. If it were true, she thought, why had he not had the courage to make her understand it? The fact that the offer made by his family had not been communicated to her might have been hard to explain, but she was not disturbed for want of an explanation. She did not care for the man in the least, and there might be fifty reasons why her aunt and uncle should think him undesirable. On the whole,

she believed that Taquisara had enormously exaggerated the state of the case. The Sicilian himself impressed her as singularly honest and bold, but she was much more ready to believe that the friend who had sent him might have interested views, than that Bosio Macomer, whom she liked and admired, was anxious to get possession of her fortune.

Taquisara himself had struck her as something new in the way of a man, of a sort such as she had never seen nor dreamt of, and her mind dwelt long on the recollection of the interview. In some way which she could not explain, she vaguely connected him with the book she was now reading — the Bride of Lammermoor; in other words, he appeared to her in the light of a romantic character, and the first that had ever come within the circle of her experience. His recklessness of formalities, of all the limits supposed to be set upon the conversation of mere acquaintance, of what she might or might not think of him individually, so long as she would listen to what he had to say for his friend, seemed to her to belong to a type of humanity with which she had never come in contact. He, and he only, as yet had stirred some thought of another existence than the one which seemed to lie straight before her, — a broad, plain road, as the wife of Bosio.

Of love, indeed, there was nothing in her heart, for any man. Within her all was yet dim and

still as a sweet summer's night before the dawning. In her firmament still shone the myriad stars that were her maiden thoughts, not yet lost in the high twilight, to be forgotten when love's sun should rise, in peace, or storm, as rise he must. Under her feet, low, virgin flowers still bloomed in dusk, such as she should find not again in the rose gardens or the thorn-land that lay before her. In maidenhood's tender eyes the greater tenderness of woman awaited still the coming day.

CHAPTER IX.

The weather changed during the night, and when Veronica awoke in the morning the gusty southwest was driving the rain from the roof of the opposite house into a grey whirl of spray that struck across swiftly, to scourge the thick panes with a thousand lashes of watery lace.

As Veronica watched her maid opening the heavy old-fashioned shutters, one by one, the sight of each wet window hurt her a little more, progressively, until, when all were visible, she could have cried out of sheer disappointment. For she had unconsciously been looking forward to another day like yesterday, calm and clear and peaceful with much sunshine. But even in Naples it cannot always be spring in December — though it generally is in January. She had hoped for just such another day as the preceding one. She had remembered how she and Taquisara had stood in the sunlight by the marble steps in Bianca Corleone's garden, and she had expected to stand there again this morning with Gianluca, to hear what he had to say.

That was impossible, however, and while she was

slowly dressing she tried to decide what she should do. It was easy enough to make up her mind that she must see Gianluca, but it was much more difficult to determine exactly how she should find an excuse for going out alone on such a morning. It seemed probable that, whatever she might propose as a reason, her aunt would immediately wish to accompany her. They had given her the afternoon and the evening of the previous day in which to think over her answer, and Matilde might naturally enough expect to hear it this morning. In any case she should not be able to order the carriage and slip out alone as she had done the first time. She had meant to go out on foot with her maid, and then to take a cab in the street and drive to the villa. But in such weather as this she could not do such a thing without exciting remark. It was a week-day, and there were no masses to hear, as an excuse, by the time she was dressed.

She watched herself in the glass, while her maid was doing her hair. The dull light of the rainy morning made her own face look grey and sallow. She had not slept very well, and her eyes were heavy, she thought. The glaring whiteness of the thing she had thrown over her shoulders while her hair was being brushed made her look worse. She had little vanity about her appearance, as a rule, but on that particular day she would have been glad to look her best.

Not that she at all believed that Gianluca was dying for her; but he was certainly in love with her. Of that she felt sure, for she could not suppose that Taquisara himself was not convinced of the fact. Nor had she the smallest beginning of a tender sentimentality about the fair-haired young man. Nevertheless, if she was to meet him, she did not wish to be positively ugly, as she seemed to be to herself when she looked into the mirror, facing the dulness of the rain-beaten window. Whether she herself was ever to care for him or not, she somehow did not wish to disappoint him by her appearance, and the undefined fear lest she might affected her spirits. Then, before she had quite finished dressing, Matilde Macomer knocked at the door and came in. She was looking far worse than Veronica, and from the absence of colour in her face, her eyes seemed to be more near together than ever. Her appearance made Veronica feel a little more hopeful, and the young girl said to herself that after all the light of a rainy day was unbecoming to every one, and much more so to a woman of forty than to a girl of twenty.

She did not wish to be alone with her aunt if she could help it, and she promptly invented several little things for her maid to do, in order to keep the latter in the room. The maid was a thin, dark woman of middle age, from the mountains. She was a widow, and her husband had been an under-

steward on the Serra estate at Muro, who had been brutally murdered five years earlier by half a dozen peasants whose rents had been raised, when he endeavoured to exact payment. The rents had been raised by Gregorio Macomer, and the woman knew it, and remembered. But she was very quiet and grave, and seemed to be satisfied with her position. She was certainly devoted to Veronica. Matilde glanced at her two or three times, as though wishing her to go, but Veronica paid no attention to the hint.

After exchanging a few words with her niece the countess began to walk up and down nervously and seeming to hesitate as to what she should say. She was horribly anxious, and very much afraid of betraying her anxiety. She knew how dangerous it might be to press Veronica for an answer before it was ready. And Veronica stood before a tall dressing-mirror, making disjointed remarks about the weather, between her instructions to her maid, while apparently altogether dissatisfied with her appearance. First she wished a little pin at her throat, and then she gave it back to the woman and told her to look for another which she well knew would be hard to find. Then she quarrelled with a belt she wore, — for just then belts were in fashion, as they are periodically without the slightest reason, — and she thought that perhaps she would not wear one at all, and she asked Matilde's opinion.

The countess forced herself to consider the matter with an appearance of interest. But she was not without resources, and she suddenly bethought her of a belt of her own which Veronica might try, and sent the maid for it, apparently oblivious of the fact that, being fitted to her own imposing figure, it would be far too long for her niece. As soon as the woman had shut the door Matilde seized her opportunity.

"Have you come to any conclusion, Veronica dear?" she asked, making her voice full of a gentle preoccupation.

"I have not seen Bosio," answered the young girl. "How can I decide, until I have seen him?"

"I thought that you did not wish to see him last night —"

"No — not last night. I wished to be alone — but — one of these days, I should like to talk to him."

"One of these days! To-day, dear. Why not? He is naturally anxious for your answer —"

"Is he? It seems so strange! We have seen each other every day, for so long — and I never supposed —"

She broke off, not, apparently, from any shyness about going into the subject, but because she was very much interested in the fastening of the second pin she had tried.

"I suppose it is much better not to wear any

jewelry at all," she said, with exasperating indifference.

"Until you are married!" answered Matilde, who was not to be kept from the matter in hand. "You see, everything turns upon that," she continued, with a low laugh. "The sooner it is decided, the sooner you may wear your jewels. No," she went on rapidly. "Of course you never suspected that Bosio loved you, and he would have been very wrong to let you know it, until your uncle and I had given our permission. But he was diffident even about mentioning the matter to us. You cannot have known him so long without having discovered that he has great delicacy of feeling. He did not like to suggest the marriage. You will see when you talk with him after this. I have very much doubt whether he will have the boldness to speak very directly —"

"How absurd!" exclaimed Veronica. "As though we did not know each other intimately!"

"Yes, but that is the man's nature, and I like it in him. You can easily manage to let him understand at the first word what you have decided. But if you would tell me first, — especially if you mean to refuse, — it would be better. I myself wish only the happiness of you both. You must be absolutely free in your decision. After all, I daresay that you will refuse him."

With great mastery of her tone and manner, she

spoke in an indifferent way. She was trying the dangerous experiment of playing a little upon Veronica's contrariety. The young girl laughed.

"That is not at all certain!" she answered. "Only I do not see why you should all be in such a hurry. If Bosio has been in love with me so long as you say, he will remain in love long enough for me to think over the matter, will he not? If he has been in a state of anxiety for weeks, it will not hurt him to be anxious for one day more — or a week more — or even a month. After all, it is for all my life, you know, Aunt Matilde. I must see how the idea looks when I am used to it. I am not a child, and I am not foolishly frightened at the idea of being married, nor out of my mind with joy at it, either, like a girl of the people."

"Of course not," said Matilde, growing a little pale with sheer nervousness.

"I daresay that we should be very happy together," continued Veronica. "But how can I possibly be sure of it? No — I suppose that one is never sure of anything until one has tried, but one may feel almost sure that one is going to be sure; that is what I want, before I say 'yes.' Do you wonder?"

"Oh, no!" answered the countess, quickly agreeing with her. "On the contrary —"

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the return of the maid. The belt, as was to be ex-

pected, did not fit at all, and Veronica put on her own again. The maid moved about the room, setting things in order.

"Give him a sign, if you wish him to speak when you meet," said Matilde, in a low voice. "It will be so much easier for him. Wear a flower in your frock to-night at dinner — any flower. May I tell him that?"

"Yes," answered Veronica, for it seemed a charitable suggestion so far as Bosio was concerned. "I am going out, now," she added suddenly. "May I have the carriage?"

"Certainly. Shall we go together?"

"Oh, no! I do not want you at all!" cried the young girl, frankly and laughing. "I have a secret. I will take Elettra with me."

Elettra was the name of the maid.

"Very well," replied Matilde. "I suppose you will tell me the secret some day. Is it connected with New Year's presents? There are three weeks yet. You have plenty of time."

Veronica laughed again, which was undoubtedly equivalent to admitting her aunt's explanation, and therefore not, in theory, perfectly truthful. But she did not wish the countess to know that she was going to Bianca Corleone's house, since Matilde would of course suppose, if she knew it, that she was going to consult Bianca about accepting Bosio, which was not true either. She laughed, therefore, and said

nothing, having got the use of the carriage, which was all she wanted.

"It is horrible weather," observed Matilde, looking at the window, upon which the rain was beating like wet whips, making the panes rattle and shake.

"Yes, but I want some air," answered Veronica, in a tone of decision.

At such a time it was not safe to irritate the girl even about the smallest matter, and Matilde said nothing more, though under other circumstances she would have made objections. As it was not yet time to go out, and in order to get rid of her aunt, Veronica bade Elettra take out a ball gown which needed some change and improvement, Matilde understood well enough that it was useless to wait longer for the chance of being again alone with her niece, and in a few minutes she went away.

On the whole, she had the impression that the prospect was very good. But after she had closed the door, she turned in the outer room, stood still a moment and looked back, allowing her face for a moment to betray what she felt. The expression was a strange one; for it showed doubt, fear, conditional hatred, and potential vengeance — a complicated state of mind, which the cleverest judge of human faces could hardly have understood from Matilde's features. Then, with bent head, and closed hands hanging by her sides, she went on her way.

An hour later Veronica and her maid were driving through the rain westward, towards Bianca's villa. As they approached their destination, Veronica felt that she was by no means as calm and indifferent as she had expected to be. Yesterday, it had seemed a very simple matter to go to the garden, to find Gianluca there, to walk ten or twenty paces with him out of hearing of Bianca, and to listen to what he had to say. In a manner it had seemed, indeed, a wild and romantic adventure, which she should remember all her life. But it had looked easy to do, whereas now, all at once, it looked very hard. Again and again, on the way, she was on the point of stopping the carriage and returning. It all looked so different, at the last minute, from what she had expected.

It was raining, and she should find Bianca indoors. Probably she would be sitting in her boudoir, beyond the drawing-room, and Pietro Ghisleri would be with her. Veronica would have to give some little excuse or reason for coming, on his account, even though Bianca was her intimate friend. Probably Gianluca would be there already, for it was past eleven o'clock, and Bianca would understand that his coming was the result of what Taquisara had said to Veronica on the previous day. She would not show that she understood, even to Veronica, because she was tactful, but Veronica knew that she was sure to blush, in spite

of herself, at the thought that Bianca knew why she had come. Then, too, in the drawing-room, or the boudoir, it would not be easy to be alone with Gianluca. She could not get up and go and stare stupidly out of the window at the rain, taking him with her.

She was naturally too obstinate to change her mind, and turn back; yet by the time the brougham drove into Bianca's gate, she really hoped that Gianluca might not come at all. But when she crossed the threshold of the house, she already hoped that he might be there. Her doubts were soon set at rest by the sight of his thin face and almost colourless beard, in the distance, as the servant opened the door of the drawing-room. Bianca was seated at the piano, and Gianluca was standing on one side of her, while Ghisleri bent over her on the other, looking at the sheet of music before her. She rose, as Veronica entered, — a queenly young figure, with a lovely, fateful face. To-day her eyes were dark and shadowy, and Veronica thought that she must have been crying in the night.

Gianluca had started visibly when Veronica had appeared, but she did not look at him until she had kissed Bianca, and had spoken to Ghisleri, who now, for the first time, understood the meaning of Gianluca's unexpected morning visit. Bianca had guessed it almost immediately, and had purposely

sat down to the piano to look over the music. It would seem natural, she thought, when Veronica came, that she should resume her seat, and play or sing, with Ghisleri to turn over the pages for her, while Veronica and Gianluca could talk. She was too loyal to her friend, and too discreet, to have given Ghisleri a hint, even had she been able to do so after Gianluca had come. But events proved to her that she was right.

When Veronica, at last, spoke to the younger man, there was an evident constraint in her manner. He, on his part, blushed suddenly pink, and then turned white again, almost in a moment. He put out his hand nervously, and then withdrew it, not finding Veronica's, but before he had quite taken it back, hers came forward, and hesitated in the air. Then he took it, and both smiled in momentary embarrassment over the incident, and a little at the thought of having shaken hands at all, for it is a custom reserved in the south for married women.

"Do you mind if I go on trying this song?" asked Bianca, sitting down to the piano again. "Talk as much as you please," she added. "I do not know it — I only wish to look it over."

Veronica was surprised at the ease and simplicity with which matters were arranged, and in a few seconds she found herself sitting beside Gianluca, on a narrow sofa at some distance from Bianca and Ghisleri. Gianluca looked at her sideways, and

then a moment later she looked at him; but their eyes did not meet. She had only glanced at him once, and for an instant after they had sat down, side by side, but she had got a good view of his face in that one look. It was evident to her that he was really ill, whatever might be the cause of his illness. The delicate features were unnaturally thin and drawn, and there were blue shadows at the temples such as consumptive men often have. The blue eyes were sunk too deep, and there were hollows above the lids, under the brows. His figure, too, though tall and well proportioned, had seemed frail to her when she had seen him standing by the piano, and his hands were positively emaciated.

She could not help pitying him. But it is only pity for sorrow, or for trouble, that is akin to love, not pity for physical weakness; unless, perhaps, a woman is very certainly sure that such weakness is indeed the result of love for herself, wearing the man out night and day — and then the pity she feels is instantly all but love itself and in fact often more than love in deeds. But Veronica had no such certainty. She still believed that Taquisara had overshot the mark of truth. She waited for Gianluca to speak.

"We have met — I have had the honour of meeting you — several times already, Donna Veronica, since you came from the convent," he said at last, after a little preliminary cough.

"Oh yes!" answered Veronica, with a smile. "We have often met. I know you very well."

"I was not quite sure whether you remembered me," he said.

He looked at her, and the blood rose and fell quickly in his cheeks, and his hands moved uneasily as he clasped them upon one of his knees.

"You must think that I have a very poor memory," observed Veronica, still smiling, not intentionally, but because she was young enough, and therefore cruel enough, to be amused by his embarrassment. "The last time I saw you was at the theatre, I think — at the opening night, last week — ten days ago — when was it?"

"Yes," he answered quickly. "That was the last time I saw you; but the last time we spoke was at the San Giuliano's."

"Was it? I do not remember. We have often talked — a little — at different places."

"I remember very well," said Gianluca, with a good deal of emphasis and looking earnestly at her.

Veronica tried to recall the conversation on the occasion to which he referred, but could not remember a word of it.

"Did I say anything especial, that time?" she asked, wondering whether she had then unfortunately answered 'yes,' in a fit of absence of mind, to some question of hidden import which he had perhaps addressed to her.

"Oh yes!" he answered promptly. "You told me that you liked white roses better than red ones. You see, I have a good memory."

"That was a tremendously important statement." Veronica laughed, somewhat relieved by the information.

"I always remember everything you say," said Gianluca. "I think I know by heart all you have ever said to me."

He spoke with a sort of grave and almost child-like conviction.

"I shall remember everything you say to-day," he added, after a moment's pause.

"I hope not!" exclaimed Veronica. "I sometimes say very foolish things, not at all worth remembering, I assure you."

"But what you say is worth everything to me," he said, with another sudden blush, and a quick glance, while his hands twitched.

He was painfully shy and embarrassed, and was producing anything but a favourable impression upon Veronica. She was sorry for him, indeed, in a superior sort of fashion, but she thought of Taquisara's bold eyes and strong face, and of Bosio Macomer's quiet and refined assurance of manner, and Gianluca seemed to her slightly ridiculous. It was in her blood, and she could not help it. Some of her people had been bad, and some good, but most of them had been strong, and she liked

strength, as a natural consequence. Moreover, she had not enough experience of the world to put Gianluca at his ease; and a sort of girlish feeling that she must not encourage him to say too much made her answer in such a way as to throw him off his track.

"It is very kind of you to say so," she answered lightly. "But I am sure I do not recollect ever saying anything important enough for you to remember. Take what we are saying now, for instance —"

"I shall know it all, when you are gone," interrupted Gianluca, harking back again. "Indeed — I hope you will not think me rude or presumptuous — but I thought that perhaps I might meet you here — if I came often, I mean; for Taquisara —"

"Oh yes," said Veronica, as he hesitated. "I met Baron Taquisara here yesterday. I daresay that he told you so."

As his embarrassment had increased, hers had completely disappeared — which was a bad sign for him and his hopes.

"Yes — yes. He told me —"

Gianluca leaned back suddenly in his seat, overcome with a sort of shame at the thought that Taquisara had spoken to her for him, and that he himself could find nothing to say. His face grew pale and red, and his hands trembled.

"I like your friend," said Veronica, quietly, wondering whether he felt ill.

"Yes — I am glad," answered Gianluca. "He is a true friend, a good friend. If you knew him as well as I do, you would like him still better."

Veronica thought this probable, but refrained from saying so, and remained silent. Bianca was touching gentle chords at the piano. Now and then a few words, sung in deep, soft notes, sad as the south wind, floated through the room, and then she and Ghisleri talked about the song, paying no attention whatever to the pair on the sofa.

Gianluca sighed and caught his breath. Veronica glanced quickly at him, and then looked again at the top of Ghisleri's head, as the latter bent down. She had not thought that she had expected so much of the meeting. She certainly had not the slightest personal feeling for the man beside her. And yet, somehow, she was dismally disappointed. If this was the man who was dying of love, she infinitely preferred Bosio Macomer. Gianluca was evidently in bad health. He looked as though he might be in a decline, and he was clearly very nervous and ill at ease. But he did not speak at all as she supposed that a man would who was deeply in love. Taquisara had spoken far better. He had seemed so much in earnest that if he had suddenly substituted himself for Gianluca as the

subject of his phrases, Veronica could have believed him easily enough.

"Then I may hope that you will forgive me for coming here, thinking that I might meet you?" said the young man, with a question in his voice.

"Why should you not come?" asked Veronica, not unkindly, but with the least possible inflexion of impatience.

"There can certainly be no reason, if you are not offended," he answered. "But if I thought that I had offended you, by coming, I should never forgive myself."

"But I should certainly forgive you, if you offended me unintentionally. Besides, there is no reason in the world why you should not come here to see Bianca whenever you like, if she will receive you. She goes out very little. She is glad to see people."

He was a man born to throw away opportunities, an older woman would have thought; but Veronica grew impatient at his insistence upon useless things, and his thin, nervous hands irritated her vaguely as, looking down, or in front of her, she could not help seeing them clasped upon his knee. Once, too, she was aware that Bianca leaned to one side and looked towards her, round the side of the sheet of music, as though to see how matters were progressing. Veronica began to feel that she was in a ridiculous position. The hesitation and pauses and

silences had made the brief conversation already last nearly a quarter of an hour. In that time Taquisara had said all he had to say. Veronica made a little movement, a very slight indication that she would presently leave her seat. Gianluca started and suddenly gazed earnestly into her face, so that she turned her head and met his eyes.

"Please do not go yet!" he cried in a low and earnest voice that had real entreaty in it.

"No," she answered quickly. "I am not going. But I must go soon. I cannot stay long, for I must go home to luncheon, and I have not talked with Bianca at all yet."

"Yes — I know — and I must be going too," he said nervously. "But if you knew what it is to me to sit here beside you for a few minutes —" He stopped suddenly, and the colour rushed to his face.

"In what way?" asked Veronica, with an impatient, womanly impulse to make him speak and have done with it, in order that there might be no more misunderstanding.

"Because — because I love you, Donna Veronica!" He turned quite white as he found words at last. "I must say it this once, even if you never forgive me. This is the first happy moment I have had since I saw you the last time. I love you — let me tell you so before I die, and I shall die happy if you will forgive me, for I have dreamed of saying

it, and longed to say it, so often. You are my whole life, and my days and nights only have the hours of my thoughts of you to mark them."

His words came confusedly and uncontrolled, but his voice had a longing pathetic ring in it, as of a very hopeless appeal. Veronica had been startled at first, and her eyes were wide and girlish as she looked at him. It was the first time that any man had ever told her that he loved her, and for that reason it was to be memorable; but it did not seem to be the first time. Taquisara's manly pleading and fervent voice when he had spoken yesterday had left her ears dull to this real first time of hearing love speeches, so that this seemed the second, and the words she heard, after the first little shock of realizing what they were, touched no chord that would respond.

She did not answer at first, but half unconsciously she shook her head, as she turned from him and looked away once more. Perhaps that was the most unkind thing she could have done; for it was so natural, and simple, and unaffected a refusal, that he could hardly be mistaken as to her meaning; and, after all, she had led him on to speak. She herself was shocked at her own heartlessness a moment later, and in one of those absurd concatenations of ideas which run through the mind at important moments, she felt as though she had been giving a merchant an infinity of trouble

to show his wares, only to buy nothing and go away. Then the brutality of the involuntary simile distressed her, too, and she felt that she ought to say something to destroy the effect of it on her own mind, as well as to comfort Gianluca. But she could not find much to say. Very young women rarely do, under the circumstances.

"I am very sorry," she said gently.

She felt that he might have a right to reproach her for coming there, and she was grateful to him for not doing so, having really very little idea of the nature of the over-submissive and humble love which sapped his manliness instead of rousing his courage.

"Ah, I knew it!" he almost moaned, and resting his elbows upon his knees he covered his face with his delicate, white hands, that trembled spasmodically now and then. "I knew it," he repeated in his broken voice. "You were kind to let me speak — I kiss your hands — for your kindness — I thank you —"

His voice broke altogether. Veronica heard a smothered sob, and glancing at him nervously, saw the tears trickling down between his fingers. She looked up quickly to see whether Bianca had noticed anything, but the sweet, deep voice was singing softly to the subdued chords of the piano, and Veronica sat quite still, waiting for Gianluca to recover his self-control.

She felt that she pitied him, but at the same time considered him in some way an inferior being; and as the idea of marrying him crossed her mind again, her heart started in repugnance at the mere thought.

CHAPTER X.

Veronica left Bianca Corleone's house with a very painful sense of disappointment, and as she drove homeward through the wet streets, she could not get rid of Gianluca's tearful blue eyes, which seemed to follow her into the carriage; and in the rattling and jolting, she heard again and again that one weak sob which had so disturbed her. At that moment she would rather have gone directly back to the convent in Rome, to stay there for the rest of her life, than have married such an unmanly man as she believed him to be. His words had left her cold, his face had frozen her, his tears had disgusted her. She pitied him for his weakness, not for his love of her, and she hoped that she might never again hear any man speak to her as he had spoken. Nevertheless there had been in his tone, at the last, the doubt-splitting accent of a sharp truth that hurt him to tears. She wondered why he had not moved her at all. The day seemed more grey and wet and desolate than ever. She thought that everybody in the street looked draggled and disappointed. Near Santa Lucia she passed a wretched vender of strung filberts and

doubtful cakes, mounting guard over his poor little handcart with a dilapidated umbrella, under the half-shelter of a projecting balcony. A couple of barefooted boys crouched on the wet pavement by the sea-stairs, with a piece of sacking drawn over both their heads together, gnawing hard-tack, and as the rain struck the stones, it splashed up in their faces under their sack. On the left, the coral shops showed their brilliant wares dimly through the rain-streaks, with closed glass doors through which here and there the disconsolate face of the shopkeeper was visible, as he stood gazing out upon the dismal, dripping scene. A sailor man came out of the marine headquarters at the turning of the Strada dei Giganti, bending his flat cap against the rain and burying his ears in the blue linen collar of his shirt, which was turned back over his thick jacket. The water splashed out from under his heavy shoes, to the right and left, as he walked quickly up the hill. Beyond that, the Piazza San Ferdinando was deserted, and the broad wet pavement lay flat and darkly gleaming upward to the broad, watery sky that stretched grey and even, without shading, like a sheet of wet india rubber over all the city. Then the Toledo, where the gutters could not swallow the deluge, but sent their overflow in dark yellow streams down each side of the street — then the narrower, darker ways and lanes between the high

houses and the low, black doorways, through the heart of old Naples, home at last to the Palazzo Macomer.

Veronica was glad to get back to the fire in her own room, and to feel dry again — for seeing so much water had given her the sensation of being drenched. And she sat down to think over what had happened in the morning, trying to understand her own disappointment, because she believed that she had expected nothing, and therefore that she could not be disappointed. She was very glad to get back to her own room. So far as she at all knew what a home meant, the Palazzo Macomer was home to her, and she had no distinct recollection of any other. Gregorio and Matilde and Bosio were her own family, so far as she had ever known what to understand by the word. They were more familiar to her than any other people in the world possibly could be, and if she felt that she had little affection for her aunt and uncle, yet she knew that there was a bond; and she was sincerely attached to Bosio for his own sake.

She had photographs of all three on the mantelpiece, in silver frames, — that of her aunt standing in the middle, and one of the men on either side. She looked at Bosio's, taking it down from its place. She looked at it critically, and seeing a speck of dust on the glass, just over the face, she passed her handkerchief over it, polishing the surface, and

looking at it again. From the photograph any one would have said that Bosio was a handsome man, for he photographed well, as the phrase goes. His clear, pale complexion, his well-cut, refined features, his smooth, thick, silky hair looked singularly well against the smoked background, and had at once the strength and the transparency which make a good photograph by adding an illusion of relief to the flatness of mere outline and light and shade. Probably the likeness was flattered. But Veronica did not think so just then, coming as she did from a disillusionment which had affected her more strongly than she knew. She compared Bosio with Gianluca, in appearance, and Gianluca lacked almost everything which could bear comparison. She compared Bosio with Taquisara, and she preferred the quiet refinement of the one to the bold eyes and high aquiline features of the other. At least, she thought so. But she also preferred Taquisara to Gianluca, by many degrees of preference. Yet both these men were commonly spoken of as handsome.

She thought of another point, too, and with her blood it was natural that she should think of it. If she married Bosio, he would take her name and titles; not she, his. She would rule the house and be independent — not of him, exactly, for she was fond of him and had no desire to be despotic over him, but of parents and elders and relations who

would think it their right to advise and guide. All this would be different with Gianluca for her husband. The Della Spina were proud of their name and would expect her to bear it. They were numerous, too; the old father and mother would oppress and burden her life, and the brothers and sisters of Gianluca would grow up to be more or less of a perpetual annoyance to their elder brother's wife. Of that side of life her aunt had given her more than one picture, intentionally exaggerating a little, perhaps, for her own purposes. And from Bianca she had heard many things of the same kind. Married to Bosio, she would be free altogether from any one's interference in her household.

She met them all at luncheon, and was struck by the fact that both men, as well as Matilde, looked pale and harassed, as though they had slept little. For there was little sleep or rest, except for Veronica, during those days of gnawing anxiety. She was struck, too, and startled, by Gregorio's hideous laugh, which broke out twice during the meal without any apparent reason. Even the servants seemed to shudder at it and looked at him anxiously, and Matilde's dark eyes tried to control him. Indeed, when she looked at him, he seemed docile enough, except that his face twitched very strangely as he nodded to her.

But they all talked, with the evident intention of seeming at their ease; and in a measure they

succeeded, for they were not weaklings like Gianluca. Bosio was by far the least strong in character, but his very remarkable self-possession made him their equal in the present case. On the previous evening, when Veronica had not been present, they had scarcely made an effort; but now that she was seated at table with them, they performed their parts conscientiously and not without success.

They were encouraged, too, by Veronica's manner to Bosio. After her experience in the morning it was a distinct pleasure to be again in his society, and she talked enthusiastically to him of the Bride of Lammermoor — the book he had given her and which she had begun to read during her solitary dinner on the previous evening. She was sure of the response to what she said, before she said it, and it came surely enough. She felt that he understood her, and that she should be glad to talk with him every day. Several days had passed since they had been alone together for half an hour.

She compared him with the photograph of him, too, and she came to the conclusion that the likeness was not so much flattered, after all. His unusual pallor to-day had something luminous in it, and the features, in two days of suffering, had grown thinner with a sort of finely chiselled accentuation of their natural refinement. To-day, he reminded her of certain portraits of Van Dyck.

But when luncheon was over, she avoided being alone with him, for she had not yet come to any decision. It would be more true, perhaps, to say that she distrusted herself in the decision she now seemed to have reached too suddenly. For in the expansion of sympathy she enjoyed so much it all at once seemed to her that she could never marry any one but Bosio, who understood her so well, who anticipated what she was going to say, and knew beforehand what she thought upon almost any subject of conversation.

She had never been exactly opposed to the idea, from the first; but now it took possession of her strongly, as it had never done before, and she might almost have taken her genuine affection for the man for love, if she had ever been taught to suppose that love was necessary before marriage. She had been far too carefully brought up in Italian ideas of the old school, however, to make any such self-examination necessary. She had been told that it was important that she should like and respect the man she was to marry. She had no reason for not respecting Bosio, so far as she knew, and she certainly liked him very much indeed.

But she meant to wait until the evening, and give herself a chance to change her mind once more. After luncheon there was the usual adjournment to another room for coffee, over which the two men smoked cigarettes. Veronica expected that Matilde

would ask her by a gesture, or a word in a low tone, whether she were any nearer to a conclusion than before, but the countess did nothing of the sort, for she was far too wise; and Veronica was grateful for being left entirely to her own thoughts in the matter. Nor did Bosio bestow upon her any questioning glance, nor betray his anxiety in any way except by his pallor, which he could not help, of course. Veronica thought that once or twice his eyes brightened unnaturally, in the course of conversation; and in his manner towards her she might have fancied that there was a shade more than usual of that sort of affectionate deference which all women love, though they love it most in the strong, and it sometimes irritates them a little in the weak, for a passing moment, when their caprice would rather be ruled than flattered. Bosio made no attempt to be alone with her, and at the end of half an hour both he and his brother departed to their own quarters.

Even then, when she was alone with Veronica, Matilde did not return to the subject which was uppermost and above all important in her mind. With amazing tact and self-control she talked pleasantly enough, though she managed to place herself with her back to the light, so that Veronica could not see her expression clearly. At last she rose and said that she must go out. The weather had improved a little, and she asked Veronica to go with

her. But the young girl had no desire to be driven through Naples in a closed carriage a second time that day, and she went away to her own room, with the intention of spending a quiet afternoon by the fire with her novel.

On the previous evening she had read a little over her dinner, and from time to time during the short evening she had returned to the book, feeling that it was easier to read than to think, and much more satisfactory. She took the volume now, but she could not read at all. She was overcome by a wish which seemed wholly unaccountable, to send for Bosio to meet her in the drawing-room, and to tell him outright that she was willing to marry him. Nothing but maidenly self-respect prevented her from doing so at once, and the hours seemed very long before dinner. Many times she rose from her seat by the fire and moved about her room in an objectless way, touching things uselessly and looking for things which were not lost, which she did not want, but which she could not find. She wished that she had her great jewels. She would have tried them on before the mirror — anything to pass the time. But they were all safely stored in one of the safest banks.

She grew more and more restless as the minutes passed and the dinner hour approached. Looking at herself in the glass, she said that her cheeks were no longer sallow, as they had seemed to be in

the morning. There was a fresh colour in them, and it was becoming to her and pleased her. Her soft hair had fallen a little upon each side of her brows, and her eyes were brilliantly bright. She looked at them when the twilight was coming on, and they seemed to shine, with wide pupils, having a light of their own.

At last the time came. Before she rang for her maid, who had brought lights and had gone away again, she stood a moment before the fire and looked once more at Bosio's photograph, asking herself seriously for the last time whether she should marry him or not. But the answer was there before the question, and she had made up her mind.

At the last minute, she had forgotten the flower she had promised to wear, and she sent her maid in haste to see whether she could find one of any sort in the house. It was the middle of December, and it was not probable that such a thing could be found in the Palazzo Macomer. The maid came back empty-handed. Veronica told her to find an artificial one, and Elettra, after some searching, produced a very beautiful artificial gardenia, which Veronica pinned in her white bodice, with a smile. She glanced at herself once more, and saw that the colour was still in her cheeks, and she was satisfied with herself.

When she entered the drawing-room, the other

three were already there, and she saw the faces of Matilde and Bosio change as they caught sight of the flower. Gregorio apparently knew nothing of the arrangement — another instance of Matilde's tact which pleased Veronica. Matilde herself was no longer pale. She had seen how desperate she looked and had put a little rouge upon her cheeks so deftly and artistically that the young girl did not at first detect the deception. But her features had still been drawn and weary. They relaxed suddenly in a genuine smile when she saw the gardenia. But Bosio grew paler, Veronica thought, and looked very nervous. At table, he was opposite Veronica, and he reminded her more than ever of Van Dyck's portraits, so that she wondered why she had never before thought of the general resemblance. He talked less than at luncheon, and sometimes his eyes rested on hers with an expression which she could not understand. But there was admiration in it, as well as something else. Veronica herself was animated, and had never looked so well before, in the recollection of the other three.

After dinner Gregorio disappeared almost immediately, and at the end of a quarter of an hour Matilde left the room, merely observing that she was going to write letters and would come back when she had finished. Bosio and Veronica were alone.

To her, it seemed to have come suddenly at the end, and she did not quite realize how it was that she found herself standing on one side of the fireplace, while he stood on the other.

They looked at each other a moment. Then Veronica smiled faintly, and drew herself up — or lengthened herself — as slight young girls have a way of doing when they are pleased, and she turned a little in the movement, and glanced at the clock, still faintly smiling.

Bosio was watching her, and he could not help admiring her lithe figure and small, well-poised head, that had a sort of girlish royalty of carriage not at all connected with beauty; for she was not beautiful, and she herself knew that there were times when she was almost ugly. He saw and admired, and he cursed himself for what he meant to do. He was not sure, even now, that he could do it.

There was no awkwardness in the silence, Veronica thought, for it seemed to her that he understood, and that words were hardly necessary. If she had meant to refuse him, she would have done so through Matilde. She smiled, looking at the clock, and thinking about it all. Then she realized that no word had been spoken on either side, and she turned her head a little shyly, till she could just see his face, while the smile still lingered on her lips. One hand rested on the mantel-

piece, with the other she touched the artificial gardenia in her bodice.

"That is my answer, you know," she said quietly, and her eyes waited for his.

But he only glanced at her face, and for a moment he did not move. Then, with a graceful inclination he took her hand and raised it to his lips. She noticed even then that his own hand was dry and burning. He did not trust himself to speak. When he looked up, the room whirled with him, and he saw strange colours. He thought his teeth were chattering.

"Are you glad?" she asked, wondering a little at his silence now, and the room seemed strangely still all at once.

"Is it quite of your own free will?" he asked, as though it cost him an effort to say anything.

"Yes — quite. Of course!" Her face grew bright as though she were happy in removing the one doubt he had.

"I am very glad of that," he said quietly.

"Do you think that I would marry any one under pressure?" asked Veronica, with a soft laugh. "I will tell you something that will convince you. It is a secret. You must not tell my aunt that I know. I could have married Don Gianluca della Spina. Perhaps you know that. Did you? I did; but I will not tell you how. Only, you see — I did not care for him."

Bosio had recovered his self-possession, which had been only momentarily shaken. For there had been no surprise — he had known what to expect.

"I only knew lately of the Spina's proposal," he said. "But — shall I thank you, Veronica? Or do you understand without words? We have known each other so long, that perhaps you may."

"I think I understand," she answered.

She put out her hand again and pressed his, and again he kissed her fingers. The action was reverential, and had nothing in it of the man who loves and is accepted. Her gentle hand, maidenly and innocent, was stretched down into the hell of word and thought and deed in which his real self had its being, and he touched it with his lips, and in his heart he knelt to kiss it, as something too holy to be in this world — just because it was innocent, and his own was not. For herself he set her on no pedestal, he did not worship her, he did not love her, he admired her with the cold judgment of a man of taste. It is the purity of the unblemished and unspotted victim that makes the outward holiness of the sacrifice. He thought of his own life and of hers, hitherto side by side, and he thought of their joint life in the future, she taking him for what he was not, and he was ashamed.

In the first moment he had a brave impulse to tell her everything and be a man, even if he ruined

the woman he had loved so long, as well as the brother who bore his name. It was only an impulse, and his lips remained sealed and his face calm.

"I do thank you," he said in a low voice, when he had kissed her hand that second time. "I will do what I can to make you happy."

Yet he knew now, from the strength of that passing impulse, that if she had not spoken first, he would not have asked her directly to marry him. Twenty times during that long day, alone in his room, he had sworn that he would not marry her, whatever happened. For it was not enough that Matilde had set him free, and that he had rejoiced for one hour in his liberty. That was not enough. Matilde could not undo the work of many years by a word and a gesture. His hell was already a desert without her. But now, there was no drawing back.

Forty-eight hours ago, in that very room, almost at that hour, he had told Matilde that he would never marry Veronica Serra. And now, almost on the same spot, and facing the same way, he was telling Veronica Serra that he would do his best to make her happy.

"I am sure you will," she answered.

"I should deserve evil things if I did not," he said, passing his hand over his eyes, to shut out the sight of the innocence that faced him.

Suddenly it came over him that she must expect him to say more, to be passionate, to say that he loved her beyond all mortal things, and set her far above immortality itself, and such unproportioned phrases of the love-sick when the instant healing of response touches the fainting heart. All that, she must expect. Why not? Other women expected it, and heard all they desired, well or ill spoken, according to the man's eloquence, but always well according to their own hearts. Surely he must say something also. He must tell her how he had dreamed of this instant, how her white shade had visited and soothed his dismal hours — and the rest. As he thought what he should say, love's phrase-book turned to a grim and fearful blasphemy in his own inner ears. But she expected it, of course, and he must speak, when he would have given the life he had to save her from himself and to save himself from the last fall, below which there could be no falling. It was almost impossible. If he had not loved Matilde Macomer still, he would have turned even then and spoken the truth, come what might. But that remained. He gathered the weakness of his sin into an unreal and evil strength, as best he could, and for Matilde's sake he spoke such words as he could find — lies against himself, against the poor rag of honour in which he still believed, even while he was tearing it from the nakedness of a sin it could

not clothe — lies against love, against manhood, against God.

"I have loved you long, Veronica," he began. "I had not hoped to see this day."

The awful struggle of his own soul against its last destruction sent a strong vibration through his softened voice, and lent the base lie he spoke such deadly beauty as might dwell in the face of Antichrist, to deceive all living things to sin.

He was still standing, and his hand lay out towards Veronica, on the shelf before the clock. Slowly she turned towards him, at the first sound of his words, wondering and thrilled.

"Is it long? I do not know," he continued. "It is more than a year, since I first knew what this love meant. For I have loved little in my life — little, and I am glad, though I have been sorry for it often, for all I ever had, or have, or am to have till I die, is for you, Veronica, all of it — the love of heart and hand and soul, to live for you and die for you, in trust and faith, and love of you. You wonder? Beloved — if you knew yourself, you would not wonder that I love you so! There is no man who could save himself, if he lived by your side, as I have lived. You smile at that? Well — you are too young to know yourself, but I am not — I know — I know — I thought I knew too well, and must pay dear for knowing how one might love you and live. But it is not too well,

now. It is life, not death. It is hope, not despair — it is all that life and joy can mean, in the highest."

He paused, his eyes in hers, his hand still stretched out and lying on the shelf. Gently hers sought it and lay in it, and there was light in her face, for she believed. And he, in his suffering within, was moved; as a man is, who, being in his life but a poor knave, plays bright truth and splendid passion on a stage, and the contrast that is between being and seeming, in his heart, makes him play greatness with a strong will, born of certain despair.

"I am glad," said Veronica, softly, and she looked down, while her hand still lingered in his, and he went on.

"It is not easy for a man like me to believe that he has all the world in his grasp — in the hold of his heart, to be his as long as he lives. But you are making me believe it now — all that I did not dare to think of as even most dimly possible in my lonely life — that is why I thank you, that is why I bless you, and adore you, and love you as I do, as I can never make you guess, Veronica, as I scarcely hope you dream that a man may love a woman. That is why I would die for you, Veronica, if God willed that I might!"

The great words lacked no outward sign of living truth. His hand burned hers, and closed upon it,

pressure for word, to the end, in the terrible play of acted earnestness. Even his eyes brightened and filled themselves, determined to lie with all of him that lied to her.

Had he hated her, had it been a vengeance to make her love him in payment of a past debt of wrong, it would have seemed less foully base in his own eyes. But he liked her. She had always trusted him and liked him too, and there had been only kindness between them always. That made it worse, and he knew it. But he could do the worst now, he thought, for he had altogether given over his soul, to leave it in hell, without hope.

"I pray God that I may be worthy of your love," said Veronica, gently and earnestly.

He drew her towards him by her little hand, and himself came softly nearer to her, till his other hand was on her shoulder, drawing her still. She yielded, not knowing what she should do. Quite close she was, and he held her, unresisting, and kissed her. She had known, but she had not realized. The scarlet blood leapt up in maiden shame, and she started back a little. But she thought that he had the right to do it.

"Good night," she said, with downcast eyes, for she felt that she could not stay to look at him.

"Good night, love," he whispered.

He let her go, and she slipped from him, leaving him still standing in his place. The door closed

behind her, and he was alone, very quiet and pale, thinking of what he had done, and not rejoicing, for he knew the depth of its meaning.

He was glad it was over, for if it had been to do again, he could not have done it. His lips were parched, his throat was dry, his hands were burning; he felt as though his head were shaking on his shoulders, palsied by a blow. But such as the deed was, it had been well done, to the end. The devil, if he cared for his own, would be pleased. He had even kissed her. He knew what Judas had been, now, and what he had felt.

He did not know how long he stood there. It might have been a quarter of an hour or more; but though he watched the clock's face, his eyes saw no movement of the hands upon the dial. It seemed to him that the room was dark.

Then the door opened again, and he started and looked round, fearing lest Veronica might have come back — or her ghost, for he felt as though he had killed her with his hands. But it was Matilde Macomer. She glanced round the room and saw that Veronica was gone.

"Well?" she asked, coming swiftly forward to where Bosio was standing, pale as death under her rouge.

He faced her stupidly, with heavy eyes, like a man drunk.

"It is all over" he said slowly.

She started forward, not understanding him.

"Over? Broken off?" she cried, in horror.

"Oh no!" he answered with a choking laugh, bad to hear. "It is done. It is agreed. She accepts me."

Matilde drew breath, and pressed her hand to her left side for one moment — she, who was so strong.

"You almost killed me!" she said, so low that Bosio hardly caught the words.

Slowly she straightened herself, and the colour came back to her face, blending with the tinge of the paint. He did not move, and she came and stood near him, leaning her elbows upon the mantelpiece and turning to him.

"You have saved me," she said. "I thank you."

Bad natures can be simple, if they are great enough, and Matilde spoke simply, as she looked at him. She had been almost terrible to look at a few moments earlier, with the rouge visible on her ghastly cheeks. No one could have detected it now, and she was still splendid to see, as she stood beside him, just bending her face upon her clasped hands while her deep eyes melted in his.

He knew the difference between her and Veronica, and he straightened himself, till he looked rigid, and an unnatural smile just wreathed his lips, half hidden in his silky beard. He told himself that he had fallen the last fall, to the very depths;

yet he knew that there was a depth below them, and he tried to turn his face from her, seeking refuge in the thought of what he had done, from the evil he still might do.

"I have been thinking over all I said to you yesterday afternoon," she said gently. "I meant it, you know — I meant it all."

"I trust to Heaven you did!" answered Bosio.

"Yes, dear, I meant it," she said in a voice of gold and velvet. "I will try to mean it still. But — Bosio — look at me!"

He turned his eyes, but not his face.

"Yes?" His voice was not above his breath.

"Yes — but can you? Can I? Can we live without each other?"

"Yes, we must." He spoke louder, with an effort.

She drew nearer to him, strong and soft.

"Yes? Well — but say good bye — not as yesterday — not as though it were good bye — one kiss, Bosio, only one kiss — one, dear — one —"

And in it, her voice was silent, for it had done its tempting, and she had her will, on the selfsame spot where he had kissed Veronica. Then he trembled from head to foot, and his heart stood still. An instant later he was gone, and she had not tried to keep him. She watched him as he left her and went to the door without turning.

He walked quickly when he had shut the door

behind him, and his face was livid. The depth below the depths had been too deep. He had but one thought as he went through the rooms, and the antechamber, and hall, and out upon the cold staircase, and up to his own door, and on, and in, till he turned the key of his own room behind him. There was no stopping then, either, between the door and the table, between key and lock, and hand and weapon.

Before the woman's kiss had been upon his lips two minutes, Bosio Macomer lay dead, alone, under the green-shaded lamp in his own remote room.

Peace upon him, if there be peace for such men, in the mercy of Almighty God. He did evil all his life, but there was an evil which even he would not do upon the innocent life of another. He died lest he should do it, and desperately grasping at the universal strength of death, he cast himself and his weakness into the impregnable stronghold of the grave.

CHAPTER XI.

It was still early in the morning, and all Naples knew that Count Bosio Macomer had committed suicide on the preceding evening. Every morning newspaper had a paragraph about the shocking tragedy, but few ventured to guess at any reason for the deed. It was merely stated that Count Bosio's servant had been alarmed by the report of a pistol about nine o'clock in the evening, and on finding the door of his master's room locked had broken in, suspecting some terrible accident. He had found the count stretched upon the floor, in evening dress, with his own revolver lying beside him.

That was precisely what had happened, but the meagre account gave no idea of the confusion which had ensued upon the discovery. It contained no mention of Matilde nor of Veronica, and merely observed that the brother of the deceased was overcome with grief.

That would have been too weak an expression to apply to what Matilde suffered during the hours which followed the first appalling blow. In the overpowering horror of the situation, she did not

lose her mind, but she sincerely believed that her body could not live till the morning.

To do her justice, as she sat there beside the dead man, bent and doubled in silent, tearless grief, a dark shawl drawn over her head to hide her face, and utterly regardless, for once, of what any one might think, she thought only of him and of what she had done. For she understood, and she only, in all the household.

Beyond her conscious thoughts, if they could be called thoughts at all, the black figures of the forbidding future loomed darkly in her consciousness. They were the things she knew, rather than the things she felt, but the terror of what was to be was as real as the grief for what had been, though as yet it had less strength to move her. The blow had struck her down, and until she should try to rise she could feel nothing but the blow. In truth she did not think that she should live until the morning.

It was midnight when they lit candles, and set them beside him in great candlesticks as he lay. And she sat down at his feet and watched his still face, from beneath the shawl that hung over her head. It had been in her hands when they had told her, and her fingers had closed upon it stiffly; so she had it when she came to his room. She was glad, for she could cover herself from the eyes of those who came and went, but her own eyes

could see out, from under it, and no tears blinded her. After she had sat down, she did not move.

Gregorio Macomer had come, and had gone away, and then he had come again, when all was done, and had knelt a long time beside the couch on which his brother lay, repeating prayers audibly. His face was as grey as a stone. He only spoke to give directions in a whisper, and he said nothing to his wife, but let her alone, bowed and covered as she sat. When he had prayed, he went away, with reverently bent head, and she heard that he trod softly. In two hours he came back, knelt again, and again repeated Latin words. She knew that he was doing it for a show of sorrow, and she wished to kill him. Then, when he was softly gone again, she wondered how soon she herself was to die. There were two servants in the room, behind her, keeping watch. They were relieved by two others, changing through the night. She heard them come and go, but did not turn her head.

When the dawn forelightened, like the ghost of a buried day risen from the grave to see its past deeds, she was not yet dead. She had once read how the murderers of Vittoria Accoramboni had been torn with red-hot pincers and otherwise grievously tortured, and how knives had been thrust deep into their breasts just where the heart was not, but near it, and how they had died hard,

for they had lived more than half an hour with the knives in them, and at the last had been quartered alive. She had not believed what she had read, but now she knew that it was true. She envied them the searing, the tearing, and the knives which had at last killed them, though they had died so hard.

The wan dawn turned the dead man's face from waxen yellow to stone grey. The servants saw it, whispered, and closed the inner shutters, and the yellow candle-light shone again in the room. Any light is better than daylight on a dead face.

Matilde sat still, bowed and covered. Fixed in the world of grief, the hours of sorrow passed her by. There was neither night nor day in the dead watch of the closed room, under the tall candles, burning steadily.

Then, at last, other feet were on the threshold, stumbling, shuffling, ill-shod feet of men bearing a burden. In that city, one may not lie in his home more than one day after he is dead. They set down what they bore, beside the couch, and waited, and the woman saw their questioning faces and heard them whispering. Then one of them, with some reverence and gentleness, thrust his arm under the low pillow, and with his eyes bade another lift the feet. But Matilde rose then and came between them and the dead. They thought that she would look at him once more, and they

drew back, while she looked, for she bent over his face. But the shawl about her head fell about her, and they could not see that she kissed him. They waited.

The great woman put her hands about him, and bowed herself, and lifted him from the couch, and the men could not believe it when they saw her turn with him and lay him down in his coffin, alone, with no one to help her.

For she was very strong. She stood and looked down at him a long time, and once she stopped and moved one of his crossed hands, which touched the edge. And then she drew from her neck, from beneath the shawl, a piece of fine black lace, and laid it gently over and about his head.

"Cover it," she said to the men, and she stood waiting, lest they should touch him with their hands.

She had seen his face for the last time, and when they had covered him, they laid the coffin in another of lead which they had brought, and she stood quite still, watching the gleaming melted stuff that ran along the edges of the grey lead, like quicksilver, under the hot tool of copper. When that was done, with main strength they laid him in the third, which was covered with black velvet. And there were screws.

At last they went away, and Matilde set the tall candlesticks on each side of the velvet thing, and

looked at it again. Then she, too, with still covered head, went towards the door. But between the coffin and the door, she stood still, swaying a little, till she fell to her full length backwards and straight, as a cypress tree falls when it is cut down. But she was not dead, for she was too strong to die then. The servants carried her away to her own room, calling others to help them, for she was heavy, and they had to take her down the stairs. It was afternoon then, and when she came to herself and opened her eyes, she bitterly cursed the day, for it would have been good to die. But she never went again to the room where she had watched.

She lay still a long time, alone in silence. Then, from a room beyond hers, came the wild crash of her husband's laughter. She sat up. Her face was grim and terrible, ghastly and stained with rouge, as the shawl fell back upon her shoulders. She sat up and listened, and her smooth lips twisted themselves angrily, one against the other, as a tiger's sometimes do, when there is blood in the air. She knew now that she was really alive, for she thought of Veronica.

Veronica had not known in the night. Her rooms were at the farther end of the apartment in a quiet part of the house, and when she had left Bosio she had gone to bed immediately and had dismissed her maid. Elettra came from the room

to find the household in the hideous uproar and confusion which first followed the discovery of Bosio's death. Elettra was a wise woman as well as a revengeful one. By the deeds of the Macomer, as she looked at it, her own husband had been killed, and she had cursed their house, living and dead. She had blood now, for her blood, and in the dark corridor she smiled once. But no one should disturb Veronica, and she stood there, where any one must pass to go to the girl's room, silent, satisfied, watchful. She loved her mistress, as she hated all the Macomer, body and soul, alive and dead. Some foolish women of the household would have roused Veronica, for they came, two together, asking in loud hysterical voices, whether she knew. But Elettra kept them off, and took the news herself in the morning when Veronica rang for her.

"A terrible thing has happened in the night," she said, when she had opened the windows.

Veronica opened her eyes wide and then rubbed them slowly with her slim, dark fingers and looked again at Elettra.

"It is a very terrible thing," continued the woman, gravely. "It happened in the night, and all was confusion, but I would not let them disturb you. They heard the pistol-shot and broke down the door. He was already dead. He had shot himself."

"Who?" asked Veronica, in instant horror. "Some one in the house? A servant?"

Elettra shook her head.

"No. I would not tell you — but you must know. It was Count Bosio."

Veronica turned pale and started up. "Bosio? Bosio dead?" she cried in a voice that was almost a scream.

The woman was sensible and understood her, and by that time the household was quiet, so that there was no fear lest any one else should come to Veronica's room.

But when she was quite sure of what had happened, Veronica wept bitterly for a long time, burying her face in her pillows and refusing to listen any more to Elettra. Then, if the woman had not prevented her, almost forcibly, she would have gone upstairs to see him where he lay dead. But Elettra would not let her go, for she knew that Matilde was there, and why; and moreover, it was not within her ideas of custom that a young girl should go and look at any one dead. But Veronica's tears flowed on.

At first it was only sorrow, real and heartfelt, without any attempt to reason and explain. But by and by she began to ask herself questions for the dead man's sake. In her dreams the sweet words he had spoken in the evening had come back to her, and when she had first opened her

eyes at the sound of Elettra's voice she had thought that she saw his eyes before her in the dimness, before the windows were all opened. She had not loved him yet, but those words of his had touched something which would have felt, by and by. And suddenly, he was gone. Why? It was so sudden. It was as though a part of the earth had fallen through, into space beneath, without warning. There was too much gone, all at once. She could only ask why. And there was no answer to that.

Her eyes fell upon the artificial gardenia she had worn. It lay upon the dressing-table where she had tossed it when she had taken it from her bodice. Her tears broke out again, for it had meant so much last night, and could mean now but the memory of that much, and never again anything more. It was a long time before Veronica dried her eyes, and consented to dress.

Apart from the sorrowful horror that filled her, it seemed so very strange that he should have killed himself just after she had promised to marry him, within an hour after they had spoken together of the happiness to come.

"It was an accident," she said at last, speaking to herself, as though she had reached a conclusion. "He did not mean to do it."

Elettra shook her head, but said nothing. Accident, or no accident, it was the blood of a Macomer

for the blood of her own dead husband, murdered up there in Muro by the peasants because Macomer had burdened them beyond their power to pay.

She said nothing, and Veronica expected no answer, but sat still, trying to think, while Elettra noiselessly set the big dressing-room in order. The woman had given her a black frock without consulting her.

Though Veronica liked her, and knew that she could rely on her devotion, she was not one of those Italian girls who readily confide in their serving-women, and she had told Elettra nothing about the projected marriage, and she said nothing of it now, though she was mourning her betrothed husband. But she told Elettra to go out and buy a little crape to put on the black frock, and to send for dressmakers to make mourning things quickly.

The confusion in the house had subsided into stillness. Bosio Macomer was in his coffin. The servants were exhausted, and there was no one to direct. Gregorio had been heard laughing wildly in his room, and a frightened chambermaid said that he was going mad. Elettra had great difficulty in getting something to eat, which she brought to Veronica's room with a glass of wine.

The girl's first outbreak of sorrow ebbed to a melancholy placidity, as the hours went by. She got her prayer-book, and read certain prayers for the dead. When her maid had gone out to buy

the crape, she knelt down and said prayers that were not in the book, very earnestly and simply; and now and then her tears flowed afresh for a little while. She took the artificial gardenia and put it away in a safe place, after she had kissed it; and she wondered when she remembered how she had blushed last night when Bosio kissed her that once — that only once that ever was to be. And she took his photograph and looked at it, too. But she could not bear that yet — at least, not to look at it too closely.

Vaguely she tried to think what the others might be doing in the house, and why no one came to her but her maid. It seemed to her that she was always to be alone, now, for days, for weeks, for years. As she grew more calm, she attempted to imagine what life would be without the companionship of Bosio. That was what she should miss, for she was but little nearer to love than that. It all looked so blank and gloomy that she cried again, out of sheer desolation and loneliness. But of this she was somewhat ashamed, and she presently dried her eyes again.

She did not like to leave her room, either. It seemed to her that death was outside, walking up and down throughout the rest of the house, until poor Bosio should be taken away. And again she wondered about Matilde and Gregorio, and what they were doing. She tried to read, but not the

novel Bosio had given her. She took up another book, and presently found herself saying prayers over it. The day was very long and very sad.

Before Elettra came back from her errands, a servant knocked at Veronica's door. He said that there was a priest who was asking for her, and begged her to receive him for a few moments.

"It cannot be for me," answered Veronica. "It must be a mistake. He wishes to see my aunt, or the count."

"He asked for the Princess of Acireale," said the man. "I could not be mistaken, Excellency."

"He does not know who I am, or he would not ask for me by that name. Does he look poor? It must be for charity."

"So, so, Excellency. He had an old cloak, but his face is that of an honest man."

"Give him ten francs," said Veronica, rising to get her pocketbook. "And tell him that I am sorry that I cannot receive him."

The servant took the note, and disappeared. In three minutes he came back.

"He does not want money, Excellency," he said. "He says he is the Reverend Teodoro Maresca, curate of your Excellency's church in Muro, and begs you earnestly to receive him."

Veronica rose again. She knew Don Teodoro by name, for Bosio had often spoken of him to her, as his former tutor and his friend. It was for Bosio's

sake that he had come — that was clear. Veronica asked where her aunt was, and on hearing that Matilde had retired to her own room, she told the servant to bring Don Teodoro to the yellow drawing-room.

A moment later she followed. The tall priest was standing with bent head before the fireplace, on the very spot where so much had happened during the last two days. He held his three-cornered hat in one hand, and was stretching out the other to warm it at the low flame. Veronica was a little startled by his face and extraordinary features, but he looked at her clearly and steadily through his big silver spectacles, and he had a venerable air which she liked. She noticed that when she advanced towards him, he bowed like a man of the world, and not at all like a country priest.

"I thank you for receiving me, princess," he said, gravely. "I have heard the sad news. I was Bosio's friend for many years. I spent an hour with him only the day before yesterday, during which he told me much about himself and about you. If, before he died, he told you nothing of what he told me, as I think probable, it is necessary for you to know it all from me as soon as possible. Forgive me for speaking hurriedly and abruptly. The case is urgent, and dangerous for you. Shall we be interrupted here?"

"I think not," said Veronica, considerably surprised by his manner. "But of course—" she paused doubtingly.

"Have you a room of your own, where you could receive me?" asked the old man, without hesitation.

"Yes — that is — I should not like to—"

"I am an old priest, princess, and this is a time of confusion in the house. You can risk something. It is important. Besides, I am in your own service," he added, with a quiet smile. "I am the chaplain of your castle at Muro."

"Yes — that is true." Veronica looked at him with a little curiosity, for she had never been to Muro, and it was interesting to see one of her dependents of whom she had often heard. "Come," she said suddenly. "We shall meet no one, except my maid, perhaps — Elettra. Do you know her? Her husband was under-steward, and was killed."

"I know of her — I buried him," answered the priest.

She led the way to her own part of the house, to the large room which served her as dressing-room and boudoir. After all, as he had said, he was a priest and an old man. She made him sit down beside her fire, in her own low easy-chair, for he looked thin and cold, she thought, and she felt charitably disposed towards him, not dreaming what he was going to say, and supposing that he had exaggerated the importance of his errand.

"Princess —" he began, and paused, choosing his words.

"Do not call me that," she said. "Nobody does. Call me Donna Veronica."

"I am old fashioned," he answered. "You are my princess and feudal liege lady. Never mind. It would be better for you if you were in your own castle of Muro, with your own people about you, though it is a gloomy place, and the scenery is sad. You would be safe there."

"You speak as though we lived in the Middle Ages," said the young girl, with a faint smile.

"We live in the dark ages. You are not safe here. Do you know why my dear friend Bosio killed himself last night?"

"It was an accident! It must have been an accident!" Veronica's face was very sorrowful again.

"I wish it had been," said Don Teodoro. "They will say so, in charity, in order to give him Christian burial. But it was not an accident, princess. My friend told me all the truth, the day before yesterday. It is very terrible. He killed himself in order not to be bound to marry you."

The round, silver-rimmed spectacles turned slowly to her face.

"In order not to marry me! You must be mad, Don Teodoro! Or you do not know the truth — that is it! You do not know the truth. It was

only last night that he asked me to marry him — that is — it had been my aunt who had asked me, and I gave him the answer."

"You consented?"

"Yes. I consented —"

"That is why he killed himself," said the priest, sadly. "I knew he would, if it came to that. It is a terrible story."

Veronica stared at him in silence, really believing that he was out of his mind, and beginning to feel very nervous in his presence. He shocked her unspeakably, too, by what he said about Bosio; for if the wound was not deep, perhaps, it was fresh, and his words were brine to it. He saw what she felt, and made haste to be plain.

"I am sorry that I am obliged to tell you this," he continued, after a short pause. "I cannot help it. The only thing I can do for my dead friend is to save you, if I can. I saw the account of his death in a newspaper an hour ago, and I came at once. Will you please not think that I am mad, until you have heard me? I was his friend, and I have eaten your bread these many years. I must speak."

"Tell me your story," said Veronica, leaning back in her chair and folding her hands.

He began at the beginning, and told her all, as Bosio had told him. He omitted nothing, for he had the astonishing memory which sometimes belongs to students, besides the desire to be perfectly

accurate, and to exaggerate nothing. For he knew that she would find it hard to believe him.

She listened; and as he went on, describing the struggle in poor Bosio's heart between the desire to save the woman he loved and the horror of sacrificing Veronica as a means to that end, she leaned forward again, drawing nearer to him, and watching his face keenly. Her eyes were wide, and her lips parted a little; for whether true or not, the story was terrible as he told it, and as he had said that it would be.

"I do not know what he said to you last night," he concluded. "I give you a dead man's words, as he spoke them to me; but I have no right to those he spoke to you. This is true, that I have told you, as I hope for forgiveness of my own sins. If you stay in this house, by the truth of God, I believe that your life is not safe."

"You believe it, I am sure," said Veronica. "But I cannot. The most I can believe is that poor Bosio was already mad when he told you this. It must be true. Even supposing that my uncle were the man you think, and had ruined himself in speculations and had taken money of mine without my knowledge, would it not be far more natural that he and my aunt should come to me and confess everything, and beg me to forgive and help them for the sake of their good name? Of course it would. You cannot deny that."

"It is what I told Bosio," answered Don Teodoro, shaking his head; "but he answered that they feared you, and that your death would be a safer way, because you might not be so kind. You might go to the cardinal and lay the case before him, and they would be lost."

"I might. I probably should." Veronica paused. "That is true," she continued, "but whatever I did, I could not allow the matter to come to a prosecution — for the sake of my own name, if not for theirs. But I do not believe it — I do not believe it — indeed, I do not believe it at all. Poor Bosio was not in his right mind. That is why he killed himself. He was mad, even when he talked with you the day before yesterday — it is the only possible explanation."

"Nevertheless, something must be done," said Don Teodoro. "Your safety must be thought of first, princess."

"I feel perfectly safe here," answered Veronica. "All this is madness. The countess is my father's sister. I admit that I have not always liked her, but she has always been kind. You really cannot expect me to believe that she and my uncle would plot against my life — especially now, in this terrible trouble and sorrow! I have listened to you, Don Teodoro, and I am sure that you wish me well, but I never can believe that you are right. Really — with all respect to you — I must say it. It is wildly absurd!"

And the longer she thought of it, the more absurd it seemed. The girl was naturally both sensible and brave, and the whole tale was monstrous in her eyes, though while he had been telling it she had fallen under the spell of its thrilling interest, forgetting that it was all about herself. She looked at the quiet old priest, with his extraordinary face and quiet manner, and it was far easier to believe that a man with such features might be mad than that her Aunt Matilde meant to kill her. He was silent for a few moments.

"There is a terrible logic in the absurdity," he said at last. "Your aunt constrains you to make a will in her favour, Bosio knew that his brother is ruined and that several large mortgages expire on the first of January. He knew that his brother has defrauded you in a way which is criminal. If they can get control of your money within three weeks they are saved. They persuaded Bosio and you to be betrothed. But Bosio kills himself. The main chance is gone. There remains the one with which the countess threatened him if he would not marry you — your immediate death. Against that, stands the possibility of penal servitude in the galleys for a man and woman of high rank and social position — only the possibility, to be sure, but a possibility, nevertheless. Remember that to those who know the whole extent and criminality of the count's fraud the case appears very much

worse than it does to you, who now hear of it for the first time, in a general way, and who do not understand the nature of such transactions. I have been a confessor many years, princess. I know how few penitents can be made to believe that those they have injured will pardon them, if they frankly ask forgiveness. It is human nature. The best of us have doubted God's willingness to forgive — how much more do we doubt man's! It is all very logical, princess, very logical — far too logical, whether you will believe it or not."

"If I believed the beginning," said Veronica, "I might believe it all. But it is not proved that my uncle has defrauded me, and all the rest seems absurd, if that is not true."

"I beseech you at least to be careful!" answered the priest, earnestly.

"In what way? I shall go on living here, just the same, unless we all go into the country for the rest of the winter. Even if I thought myself in danger, I do not see what I could do."

"Eat what the others eat. Drink what the others drink. Take nothing especially prepared for you. Lock your door at night. If you will not leave the house, that is all you can do."

He shook his head thoughtfully.

It was true Italian advice — against poison and smothering. Veronica smiled, even in her sadness.

"I have no fear," she said. "Let us say no more

about it. Can I do anything for the people at Muro?" she asked, by way of preparing to send him away.

"The people at Muro — the people at Muro," he repeated dreamily. "Oh yes — they are all poor — almost all. Money would help them. The best would be to come and see us yourself, princess. But if you are not careful, you will never come now," he added, turning the big spectacles slowly towards her and looking long into her face. "I have done what I could to warn you," he said, beginning to rise. "I will do anything I can to watch over you — but it will be little. Good bye. God preserve you."

As she rose she rang the bell beside her that her maid might come and show him the way out. She knew that by this time Elettra must have returned from her errands. The afternoon light was already failing.

She held out her hand, and he took it and kept it for a moment.

"God preserve you," he repeated earnestly.

He turned just as Elettra opened the door. The woman recognized him at once, came forward and kissed his hand, he having long been her parish priest. Then she led the way out. Don Teodoro turned at the door and bowed again, and Veronica, standing by the fire, nodded and smiled kindly to him. She was sorry for him. She had never seen

him before, and he seemed to be devoted to her, and yet she was sure that his mind was feeble and unsettled. No sane person could believe the monstrous things he had told her.

Outside, he made a few steps and then stopped Elettra, laying his emaciated hand upon her shoulder. He looked behind him and saw that they were alone in the passage.

"Take care of your mistress, my daughter," he said. "Naples is not Muro, but it is no better. Let her eat what others eat, drink what others drink, and take no medicines except from you, and make her lock her door at night. This is not a good house."

The dark woman looked at him fixedly for several seconds, and then nodded twice.

"It is well that you have told me, Father Curate," she said in a low voice. "I understand."

That was all, and she turned to lead him out.

CHAPTER XII.

After that, Elettra, unknown to Veronica, slept in the dressing-room every night. After her mistress had gone to bed in the inner chamber, the woman used to lock the outer door softly and then draw a short, light sofa across it; on this she lay as best she might. The nights were cold, after the fire had gone out, and she covered herself with a cloak of Veronica's. In itself, it was no great hardship for a tough woman of the mountains, as she was. But she slept little, for she feared something. In the small hours she often thought she heard some one breathing on the other side of the door, close to the lock, and once she was quite sure that a single ray of light flashed through the key-hole, below the half-turned key. Yet this might have been her imagination. And as for the breathing, there was a large Maltese cat in the house that sometimes wandered about at night. It might be purring all alone outside, in the dark, and she might have taken the sound for that of human breathing. No people are more suspicious and imaginative than Italians, when they have been warned that there is danger: and this does not proceed from natural

timidity, but from the enormous value they set upon life itself, as a good possession.

As for what Veronica ate and drank, Elettra was wise, too. She felt sure that if any attempt were made to poison her, Matilde would manage it quite alone; and she seriously expected that such an attempt would be made, after what Don Teodoro had told her. Veronica, like most Italians in the south, never took any regular breakfast, beyond a cup of coffee, or tea, or chocolate, with a bit of bread or a biscuit, as soon as she awoke. It was easy to be sure that such simple things had not been within Matilde's reach, and it was Elettra's duty to go to the pantry where coffee was made, and to bring the little tray to Veronica's room. At night, the young girl had a glass of water and a biscuit set beside her, when she went to sleep, but she rarely touched either. Elettra now brought the biscuits herself and kept them in a cupboard in the dressing-room, and she herself drew the water every night to fill the glass. So far as any food and drink which came to her room were concerned, Veronica was perfectly safe. But Elettra could not control what she ate in the dining-room. She would not communicate her fears to Veronica, either, for she knew her mistress well; and at the same time she did not know what or how much Don Teodoro had told her during his visit. Veronica was perfectly fearless, and was inclined to be

impatient, at any time, when any one insisted upon her taking any precautions, for any reason whatsoever — even against catching cold. She was not rash, however, for she had not been brought up in a way to develop any such tendency. She was naturally courageous, and that was all. She was unconscious of the quality, for she had not hitherto been aware of ever being in any real danger.

As for Don Teodoro's warning, she put it down as the result of some mental shock which had weakened his intelligence. Possibly Bosio's sudden and terrible death had affected him in that way. At all events, she was enough of an Italian to know how often in Italy such extraordinary ideas of fictitious treachery find their way into the brains of timid people. On the face of it, the whole story seemed to her utterly absurd and foolish, from the tale of Macomer's ingenious frauds upon her property, to the supposition that she was in danger of being murdered for her fortune. Murder was always found out in the end, she thought, and of course such people as her aunt and uncle, even if they had any real reason for wishing their niece out of the way, would never really think of doing anything at once so wicked and so unwise. But the whole thing was absurd, she repeated to herself, and she found it easy to put it out of her thoughts.

Meanwhile, the first days after the catastrophe

passed in that sad, unmarked succession of objectless hours by which time moves in a house where such a death has taken place. It is not the custom among the upper classes of Italians to attend the funerals of relations and friends. The servants are sent, in deep mourning, to kneel before the catafalque in church during the first requiem mass. Occasionally some of the men of a family are present at the short ceremony in the cemetery. But that is all. The family, as a rule, leaves the city at once.

Veronica wondered why her aunt and uncle did not propose to go to the country. Macomer had a pretty place in the hills near Caserta, and though it was winter the climate there was very pleasant. She did not know that the house was already dismantled, in anticipation of the probable foreclosure of a mortgage. Besides, in his desperate position, Gregorio would have feared to leave Naples for a day. As for making a journey to some other city, he was positively reduced to the point of having no ready money with which to go. Lamberto Squarci, the notary, positively refused to advance anything, and it was quite certain that no one else would. For Squarci, who was a wise villain in his way, and had aided and abetted Macomer's frauds in order to enrich himself, had only given his assistance so long as he was quite sure that he was acting as the paid agent of Veronica's guardian.

The responsibility was then entirely theirs, and he merely obeyed their directions in preparing any necessary legal documents. But as soon as the guardianship had expired, he knew that in order to be of use in helping Macomer to rob his ward, he should be obliged to artificially construct the instruments needed, in such a way as to appear legal to the world. In such business, forgery could not be far off. The man had himself to think of as well as mere money, and at the point where the smallest illegality of action on his part would have begun, he stopped short, and refused to do anything whatever, leaving Macomer to grapple with his creditors as best he might, and to take care of himself if he could. It was now the middle of December, and the guardianship had expired, legally speaking, in the previous month of March, when Macomer's debts had already reached a very high figure. Macomer, after that, had presumed upon his authority and position to draw Veronica's income for his own purposes. That was easy, as the revenues accrued almost entirely from the great landed estates, of which the various stewards were in the habit of sending the rents, when collected, directly to Macomer. It was clear that unless Veronica herself protested, and until the authorities should discover that she was being cheated, these men would naturally continue to send the rents to the order of Gregorio Macomer.

Feeling that he was near the end of his chances, he had desperately attempted to improve his position by using as much of the year's income as he could extract from the stewards, in a final speculation. This had failed. He had not been able to pay the interest on his mortgages, and the ready money was all gone. A disastrous financial crisis had supervened, which had made itself felt throughout the country, and the banks which held the mortgages had given notice that they would foreclose some of them, and not renew the others. If Gregorio Macomer could have laid hands, no matter how, on any sum of money worth mentioning, he would have fled, under an assumed name, to the Argentine Republic, the usual refuge of Italians in difficulties. But he had exhausted all he could touch, had gambled, and had lost it. If he fled now, it must be as a penniless emigrant. As he had no taste for such adventures, at his age, there was but one chance for him, and that lay in somehow getting control of Veronica's fortune before the end of the month. As for getting any more of the income, in time to be of any use in staving off the tidal wave of ruin that rose against him, there was no chance of that. The farmers all over the country paid their quarter's rents on the first of January, or should do so, but there was often difficulty in collecting, and the money would not really get to Macomer's hands much before February. By that

time all would be over; and it was not the idea of bankruptcy which frightened Gregorio; it was the certainty that a declaration of bankruptcy must lead to, and involve, a minute examination into his past transactions which had led to it.

Matilde knew all the truth, as has been shown. What she suffered in remaining in Naples, in going and coming through the familiar rooms, in spending her evenings in that room, of all others, in which she had last seen Bosio alive, no one knew. She went about silently, and her face grew daily paler and thinner. In her behaviour she was subdued and silent, though she treated Veronica with greater consideration than before. They had never spoken together of the possible reasons for Bosio's death, but it had been publicly stated that he had been insane, and Matilde, to all appearances, accepted the explanation as sufficient. It was made the more reasonable by the evident fact that Gregorio's mind was unsettled, and that he himself was in imminent danger of going mad. That, at least, was the impression produced upon the household.

As the days went by, the gloom deepened in the Palazzo Macomer, and when the three met at their meals, or sat together for a short time in the evening, the silence was rarely broken.

At first, it was congenial to Veronica; for if her grief was not passionate nor destined to be everlasting, her sorrow was profoundly sincere. It was

the companionship of Bosio that she missed most keenly and constantly, through the long, empty hours.

No one who called was received during those first days. It chanced that Cardinal Campodonico had gone to Rome to attend one of the consistories for the creation of new cardinals, which are often held shortly before Christmas. Had he been in Naples, he would of course have been admitted. He wrote to Gregorio, and to Veronica, short, stiff, but sincere, letters of condolence. He was a man of a large heart, which was terribly tempered by a very narrow understanding; generous, rather than charitable; sincere, more than expansive; tenacious, not sanguine; keen beyond measure in ecclesiastical affairs, devoted to a cause, but unresponsive to the touch and contact of humanity; hot in strife, but cold in affection.

Society came to the door of the palace and deposited cards, with a pencilled abbreviation for a phrase of condolence, the very shortest shorthand of sympathy. Veronica looked through them. All the Della Spina people had come. She found also Taquisara's plain cards, — 'Sigismondo Taquisara,' — without so much as a title, and in the corner were the usual two letters in pencil, strong and clear, but just the same as those on all the others. Somehow, she knew that she had looked through them all, in order to find his and Gian-

luca's. The letters on the latter's bit of pasteboard were in a feminine hand — probably his mother's. Veronica's lip curled a little scornfully, but then she looked suddenly grave — perhaps he had been too ill to come himself, and if so, she was sorry for him and would not laugh at him. As for Taquisara, he was so unlike other men, that she had unconsciously expected something different to be visible on his card.

The lonely girl spent as much of her time as possible in reading. But it was very gloomy. It rained, too, for days together, which made it worse. Bianca Corleone came to see her, and they sat a long time together, but neither referred to Gianluca, and very little was said about poor Bosio. It was impossible to talk freely, so soon after his death, and Veronica was not inclined to tell even her intimate friend of what had happened on that last night. It had something of a sacred character for her, and she said prayers nightly before the poor man's photograph, sometimes with tears.

Now and then Veronica felt so utterly desolate that she made Elettra come and sit in her dressing-room and sew, merely to feel that there was something human and alive near her. She enticed the Maltese cat to live in her rooms as much as possible, for its animal company. She did not talk with her maid, but it was less lonely to have her sitting there, by the window.

She supposed that before long the first black cloud of mourning would lighten a little over the house, and she had been taught at the convent to be patient under difficulties and troubles. The memory of that teaching was still near, and in her genuine sorrow, with the youthfully fervent religious thoughts thereby re-enlivened, she was ready to bear such burdens and make such sacrifices as might come into her way, with the assured belief that they were especially sent from heaven for the improvement of her soul, by the restraint and mortification of her very innocent worldly desires.

It could hardly have been otherwise. She had not yet loved Bosio, but her affection had been sincere and of long growth. On the last day of his life he had become her betrothed husband, and for one hour all her future living, as woman, wife, and mother, had been bound up with his, to have being only with him — to disappear in black darkness with his tragic death, as though he had taken all motherhood and wifehood and womanhood of hers to the grave forever. As for what Don Teodoro had said of his having loved Matilde, she believed that less than all the rest, if possible; and the fact that the priest had said it proved beyond all doubt to her that he was out of his mind. Beyond that, it had not prejudiced her against him, for there was a certain noble loftiness in her character which could largely forgive an unmeant wrong.

In her great loneliness, in that dismal household, the reality of faith, hope, and charity as the body, mind, and spirit of the truest life, took hold upon her thoughts, as the mere words and emblems of religion had not done in her first girlhood. She read for the first time the Imitation of Christ and some of the meditations of Saint Bernard. The true young soul, suddenly and tragically severed from the anticipation of womanly happiness, turned gladly to visions of saintly joy — simply and without affectation of form or show — purely and without earthly regret — humbly and without touch of taint from spiritual pride. She had no burden to cast from her conscience, and she sought neither confessor nor director for the guidance of her thinking or doing. Straight and undoubting, her thoughts went heavenwards, to lay before God's feet the sad, sweet offering of her own sorrow.

Without, in those dark winter days, storm drove storm over the ancient, evil city, rain followed rain, and gloom changed watches with darkness by day and night for one whole week, while the moon waned from the last quarter to the new. And within, Matilde Macomer went about the house, when she left her room at all, like a great, pale-faced, black shadow of something terrible, passing words. And in the library, Gregorio's stony features were bent all day over papers and documents and books of accounts, seeking refuge from sure ruin,

while now and then his face was twisted into a curiously vacant grimace, and his maniac laugh cracked and reverberated through the lonely, vaulted chamber. He often sat there by himself until late into the night, for the end of the year was at hand, with all the destruction that a date can mean when a man is ruined.

It was a big, long room, with old bookcases ranged by the walls, not more than five feet high, and closed by doors of brass wire netting lined with dark green cotton. A polished table took up most of the length between the door which led to the hall at the one end, and the single high window at the other. There was no fireplace, and the count had the place warmed by means of a big brass brazier filled with wood coals. At night, he had two large lamps with green glass shades.

Matilde sometimes came in and sat with him during the evening. She looked at him, and wished he were dead. But she was drawn there by the power which brings together two persons menaced by a common danger, in the hope that something may suddenly change, and turn peril into safety. He sat at one end of the table with his papers, and she took the place opposite to him, the lamp being a little on one side, so that they could see each other. They were a gloomy couple, in their black clothes, under the green light, with harassed, mask-like faces.

One night, Matilde came in very late. She trod softly on the polished floor, wearing felt slippers.

"Elettra sleeps in her dressing-room," she said in a low voice.

Macomer looked up, and the twitching of his face began instantly, as though he were going to laugh. Matilde brought the palm of her hand down sharply upon the bare table, fixing her eyes upon him.

"Stop that!" she cried in a tone of command. "It is very well for the servants. You are learning to do it very well. It is of no use with me."

He looked at her steadily for a moment. Then he laughed, but naturally and low.

"I might have known that you would find me out," he said. "But it is becoming a habit. It may serve us in the end. How do you know that the woman sleeps in Veronica's dressing-room?"

"I was wandering about, just now," answered Matilde, looking away from him. "I saw the door of Elettra's room ajar. I pushed it open and looked in, and I saw that her bed was not disturbed. Then I stood outside the door of Veronica's dressing-room, and listened. Something moved once, and I was sure that I heard breathing."

Gregorio watched her gravely while she was speaking, but in the silence that followed, his small eyes wandered uneasily.

"The girl is lonely," he said at last. "She makes Elettra sleep in the room next to hers, because she is nervous."

Matilde seemed to be thinking over what she had said. Some time passed before she answered, and then it was by a vague question.

"Well?"

Again they looked at each other.

"That is certainly bad," said Macomer, thoughtfully. "What are we to do? Speak to her about it? You can say that you found Elettra's door open, at this hour."

"It would do no good," answered Matilde. "We could not prevent her from having her maid there, if she wishes it."

"After all," observed Macomer, absently, "it is only a woman."

"Only a woman?" Matilde's lip curled. "I am only a woman."

Macomer nodded slowly, as though realizing what that meant, but he said nothing in answer. With his hands under the table he slipped low down in his chair, his head bent forward upon his breast, in deep thought.

"Can you not suggest anything?" asked Matilde, at last, gazing at him somewhat scornfully. "After all, this is your fault. You have dragged me into this ruin with you."

"I know, I know," he repeated in a low voice.

"But we cannot do it now — with that woman there."

"No. It is impossible now." Matilde's tones sank to a whisper.

She looked down at her strong hands that had grown thinner during the past days, but were strong still. Gregorio waited a few moments and then roused himself and bent over his papers again.

"You cannot see any way out of it, can you?" asked his wife at last. "Is there no possibility of keeping afloat until things go better?"

"No," answered Macomer, not looking up. "There is nothing to go better. You know it all. There is only that one way. Failing that, I must go mad. One can recover from madness, you know."

"Yes," said Matilde, thoughtfully. "But it is a very difficult thing to do well. They have expert doctors, who know the real thing from the imitation."

Gregorio looked up suddenly.

"She could not go mad, could she?" he asked, a quiver of cunning intelligence making his stony mask quiver. "Are there not things — is there not something — you know — something that produces that? What is all this talk, nowadays, about hypnotic suggestion?"

"Fairy tales!" exclaimed Matilde, incredulously. "The other is sure. This is no time for experiments. There are thirteen days left in

this year. If we are to do it at all, we must do it quickly."

"I do not like the idea of the pillow," said Macomer, speaking very low again.

Matilde's shoulders moved uneasily, as though she were chilly, but her face did not change.

"It is of no use to talk of such things," she answered. "Besides," she added, "you are dull. Only remember that you have just thirteen days more, after to-day."

"Remember!" his voice told all his terror of the limit.

Then Matilde did not speak again. She rested her elbows on the table, and her chin upon her hands, staring at him as though she did not see him, evidently in deep thought. He bent over his papers, but was aware that her eyes were on him. He glanced up nervously.

"Please do not look at me in that way. You make me nervous," he said.

With a scornful half-laugh she rose from her seat.

"Good night," she said indifferently, and in her soft felt slippers she noiselessly went away.

She had not come in the expectation of help from her husband in anything that was to be done. But besides the bond of fear by which they were drawn together, there was the feeling that his presence, especially in that room, brought before her vividly

the necessity for action. Under such pressure, an idea might come to her which would be worth having. It had come to-night, but it was of a nature which made it wiser not to tell Gregorio about it. Such things, being complicated and delicate, and difficult of execution, were best kept to herself, at least until her plans were matured and ready. But this time, she believed that she had at last what she wanted. The scheme flashed upon her all at once, complete and feasible, and perfectly safe, but she resolved to think it over for twenty-four hours before finally deciding to adopt it.

And while such things were being said and done in the lonely night, and deeply pondered through the long, silent days, Veronica came and went peacefully, with sad but not unhappy eyes, her thoughts fixed upon the new path by which her single sorrow was to lead her up to the eternity of all celestial joys.

In those days she determined to lead a holy life, in the memory of the dead betrothed, and perhaps in the thought that by the outpouring of much good around her, she might yet obtain mercy for the soul of one self-slain. She meant not to cut herself off from all mankind, devoting her maidenhood to heaven and her body to the servitude of slow suffering, whereby some say that the spirit may be saved most certainly — in the hard rule of daily dying, and daily rising again one day nearer

to death. That was not what she meant to do; that depth of godly dreaming was too cold and still a depth for her. There must be motion and life in her means of grace, since she had the power to make others move and live. Marriage, wifehood, motherhood, should not be for her, she said; but there was all the rest. There were the many hundreds — the thousands, indeed, had she known it — of men and women and poor children, toiling against the impossible with hands that had long learned to labour in vain, save for the bare bread of life. To them all, in many quarters of the land, she would be a mother, to help them, to feed them, and to heal them; to work for them and their welfare, as they had worked and toiled for the greatness of her dim, great ancestors, repaying to humanity, in one lifetime, what humanity had been forced to give them through many generations.

She would lead a holy life, for she would pray continually, when there was nothing else that she could do. When she could not be thinking out some good thing for her people, she would meditate upon higher things for the good of her own soul. But first and foremost should be the doing, the helping, the giving of life to the far spent, and of hope to the helpless.

There in that room, where she dwelt continually in those days, she made no vow, she registered no resolution, she imposed no one self upon another

self within her to thrust out evil and implant good. She had no need of that. It was all as simply natural as the growth of a flower, effortless, rising heavenward by its own instinct life.

In one thing only she made a determination of her will. She decided that with the new year she would at last take over her fortune and estates into her own management. Until she did that, she could not know what she had, nor where she should begin her good work. That was absolutely necessary, and of course, thought she, it presented no difficulty at all. Possibly her own indolence about it, and her distaste for going into the question of money and accounts, was a fault with which she should have reproached herself, because she might have begun to do good sooner, had she chosen. But she did not think of that. She would begin with the new year.

As though a good destiny had anticipated her desire, the first call for her help came suddenly, on the day after the last recorded conversation between Gregorio and Matilde.

It was still early in the morning when Elettra brought her a letter, bearing the postmark of the city, and addressed in one of those small, clear handwritings which seem naturally to belong to scholars and students. It was from Don Teodoro, and Veronica read it while she drank her tea and Elettra was making a fire in the next room.

The old priest did not refer to the strange story he had told her ten days earlier. But he recalled her question concerning the people at Muro and their condition. They were indeed desperately poor, he said, and the winter was a hard one in the mountains. There were many sick, and there was no hospital, — not so much as a room in which a dying beggar might lie out of the cold. It was a very pitiful tale, told carefully and accurately. And at the end the good man humbly begged that the most Excellent Princess would deign to allow his stipend to be paid in advance, in order that he might do something to help his poor.

Veronica read the letter twice, and judged it. Then she determined to do something at once, for she knew that the man had written the truth. She should have liked to send for him, and talk with him of what should be done; but she could not forget the things he had said about Bosio, and for that reason she did not wish to see him again — at least, not yet. His mind was unbalanced about that matter; but charity was a different thing.

His address in Naples was in the letter. She wrote a note in answer, begging him to tell her how much money he should need to hire a vacant house, since there was no time to build one, and to fit it decently with what he thought necessary, in order that it might serve as a refuge and hospital for the very poor. She sent Elettra with the letter.

It was raining again, and by good fortune Don Teodoro was at home, though it was still before noon. While the maid waited, he wrote his answer. His thanks were heartfelt on behalf of his parish, but shortly expressed. He said that in order to do what Veronica proposed so generously, at least two thousand francs would be necessary. He briefly explained why the charity would need what he looked upon as a large sum, and he begged pardon for being so frank.

Again Veronica read the letter carefully over, and she put it into the desk. Half an hour later she went to luncheon. The meal was as silent and gloomy as usual, and scarcely half a dozen words were said. Afterwards the three came back to the yellow drawing-room for their coffee. When the servant was gone, Veronica, stirring the sugar in her cup, turned to her uncle.

"Will you please give me three thousand francs, Uncle Gregorio?" she asked quietly. "I want it this afternoon, if you please."

Gregorio Macomer grew slowly white to the tips of his ears. Matilde sipped her coffee, and turned her back to the light.

"Three thousand francs!" repeated Macomer, slowly recovering a little self-control. "My dear child! What can you want of so much money?"

"Is it so very much?" asked Veronica, innocently surprised. "You have told me that I have

more than eight hundred thousand a year. It is for charity. The people at Muro have no hospital. I shall be glad if you will give it to me before four o'clock; I wish to send it at once."

Macomer had barely a thousand francs in the house, and he knew that there was not a man of business in Naples who would have lent him half the little sum for which Veronica was asking.

"I shall certainly not give you money for any such absurd purpose," said Gregorio, with sudden, assumed sternness.

Veronica raised her eyes in quiet astonishment, offended, but not disconcerted.

"Really, Uncle Gregorio," she said, "as I am of age and mistress of whatever is mine, I think I have a right to my little charities. Besides, you know, it is not giving, since you are no longer my guardian in reality. It is merely a case of sending to the bank for the money, if you have not got it in the house. I should like it before four o'clock, if you please, Uncle Gregorio."

In his terror the man lost his temper.

"I shall certainly not let you have it," he answered, with cold irritation. "It is absurd!"

If Veronica had wanted the money to spend it on herself, she might have waited until he was cool again, in the evening, before insisting. But her blood rose, for she felt that it was for her poor people, starving, sick, frozen, shelterless, in distant

Muro. She knew perfectly well what her rights were, and she asserted them then and there with a calm young dignity of purpose which terrified Gregorio more and more.

"This is very strange," she said. "I do not wish to say disagreeable things, Uncle Gregorio; we should both regret them. But you know that I am entitled to spend all my income as I please, and I must really beg you to get me this money at once. It is for a good purpose. The case is urgent. I am the proper judge of whether it is needed or not, and I have decided that I will give it. There is nothing more to be said."

"Except that I entirely refuse to listen to such words from my ward!" answered Gregorio, angrily.

"I appeal to you, Aunt Matilde," said Veronica, setting down her coffee cup upon the table and turning to the countess.

But Matilde knew well enough that her husband could not get the money. She shook her head gravely and said nothing.

By this time Veronica was thoroughly determined to have her way.

"Very well," she answered calmly. "I shall telegraph to the cardinal. I understand that he is in Rome."

Gregorio turned away, and he felt that his knees were shaking under him. He knew well enough what the result would be if the cardinal's suspicions

were aroused. Matilde saw the danger and interfered.

"I think you are pushing such a small matter to the verge of a quarrel, Gregorio," she said sweetly. "Since Veronica insists, you must give her the money. After all, it is hers, as she says."

Macomer turned and stared at his wife in amazement.

"I am going out at once," she continued. "If you like, I will go to the bank and get the money for you. Yes, dear," she added, turning to Veronica, "I shall be back before four o'clock, and you shall have it in plenty of time. Did you say four thousand or five thousand?"

"Only three," answered the young girl, rapidly pacified. "Three thousand, if you please. Thank you very much, Aunt Matilde! A woman always understands a woman in questions of charity. One wishes to act at once. Thank you."

And in order to end an unpleasant situation, she nodded and left the room. Husband and wife waited a moment after the door was closed. Then Matilde, before Gregorio could speak, went and opened it suddenly and looked out, but there was no one there.

"She would not listen at the door!" exclaimed Gregorio, with some contempt for his wife's caution.

"She? No! But I distrust that woman she has."

"And how do you propose to get this money?" asked the count.

"Have I no diamonds?" inquired Matilde. "She would have ruined us. Order the carriage, and I will go to a jeweller at once."

"Yes," said Macomer. "You are very wise. I thought there was going to be trouble. It was clever of you to restore her confidence by offering her more. But—" he lowered his voice—"something must be done at once."

"Yes," answered Matilde, looking behind her. "It shall be done at once."

He went out half an hour later, and before four o'clock Veronica despatched Elettra to Don Teodoro with three thousand francs in bank notes. But the diamonds which Matilde had left at the jeweller's were worth far more than that, and she had got more than that for them.

CHAPTER XIII.

Veronica was well satisfied, and slept peacefully, dreaming of the pleasure she had given the old priest, and of the good which he could do with her money. And then in her dream, the scene of his first visit was acted over, and suddenly Veronica started up awake in the dark. She must have uttered an unconscious exclamation, just as she awoke, for in a moment the door opened and she heard Elettra's voice asking her if she needed anything, but in a tone so anxious and changed that it seemed to Veronica to belong to her dream rather than to any reality.

"Are you there?" she asked, in the darkness, surprised that the woman should have come in so unexpectedly.

"Yes," answered Elettra, briefly, and she groped for the matches on the little table beside the bed.

She struck a light and lit a candle. Veronica saw that her face was very pale, and that she was half dressed, wearing a black skirt and a white cotton jacket. As the young girl looked at her she realized how strange it was that she should have appeared at the slightest sound.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, with a little smile. "What time is it?" She looked at the watch, holding it up to the flame of the candle. "Three o'clock! What is the matter, Elettra? Why have you come?"

Elettra looked down, in real or pretended confusion.

"Excellency," she said in a humble tone, "my room is very cold and damp in this rainy weather. For some nights I have slept on the sofa in the dressing-room. I hope your Excellency will pardon me. And I heard you cry out, just now. Then, forgetting that I ought not to have been sleeping there, I got up and came."

"Oh! Did I cry out? Yes — I woke up suddenly. I was dreaming of Don Teodoro and of —" She checked herself. "Why did you not tell me that your room is damp? You shall have another."

"Excellency, if you will forgive me, it would give trouble at this time. If you will allow me to sleep on the sofa until the weather is fine again. I will make no noise. You have seen — in the morning no one would know it, and I am very well there."

Veronica looked at her and hesitated a moment. In the stillness she heard a soft sound.

"What is that?" she asked quickly.

"It is the cat," answered the maid, peering down below the level of the candle-light.

"It did not sound like the cat," said Veronica, pushing her dark, brown hair back with her slim hand, and looking down over the edge of the bed. "It was more like a footstep," she added, with a little laugh.

But at that moment she caught sight of the Maltese cat's green eyes in shadow. The creature came forward from the door, sprang instantly upon the foot of the bed and lay down, purring, its fore-paws doubled under it, and its eyes shut.

"It is a heavy cat," said Elettra, thoughtfully. "It is so fat. One can hear it when it walks across the room."

She scratched its head gently, and it purred more loudly under her hand.

"Excellency, you will allow me to sleep in the dressing-room, just for these days," she said presently.

"Oh yes — if you like," answered Veronica, laying her head down upon the pillow, sleepy again.

The maid bent over her and drew the things up about her neck in a half-tender, motherly way, looking at the girl's face. Then she hesitated before putting out the light.

"Excellency," she said, "let us go to Muro. The air of this house is not good for you. It is damp, and you are pale in these days. In the mountains the colour will come back. The people will make a feast when you come. It will amuse you. Excellency, let us go."

Veronica laughed sleepily.

"You are dreaming, Elettra. Go away. I want to go to sleep."

The woman sighed softly, extinguished the light, and groped her way to the door in the dark. Veronica was very sleepy, as she said, but somehow after her maid had gone away, she became wakeful again for a time. The cat had remained on the foot of the bed, and its soft purring disturbed her a little, because she was accustomed to absolute silence. There had been a curious cross-fitting of her dream and of the little realities of Elettra's entrance. She had dreamt over again the priest's earnest warning that her life was in danger, and she had imagined that she heard a footstep of a person coming up quickly behind her. Then, somehow, in the same instant, recalling what Don Teodoro had told her about her uncle's frauds, she had seemed to know that he had refused the money in the afternoon because there was no more to take, nor to be given to her. Waking suddenly, she had heard Elettra's anxious voice, giving the strong impression that she was really in present peril. Then she had really thought that she heard another footstep, somewhere, while Elettra was standing still beside her. It had only been the cat, of course. It was such a very fat cat, as Elettra said, and the floors were of the old-fashioned sort, laid on wooden beams, and trembled very easily, as they

do in old Italian houses. But each detail had fitted with another, into a sort of whole which was a reflexion of the priest's story. Some of it all at once looked true, and instead of going to sleep at once, Veronica's eyes were wide open, and she turned uneasily on her pillow.

Of course, it was absurd, for she had received the money when she had insisted upon having it, and if Elettra's room was damp, that quite explained her presence. Besides, Elettra could not be supposed to know what Don Teodoro had said to Veronica. And then, there was the rest of the story, all that connected Bosio and Matilde. She absolutely refused to think of believing that. She would not even admit that there might have been some little foundation for it in the past.

Instinctively driving away the thought, she began to say certain prayers for the poor man, and little by little, repeating the words often, her mind grew calm, and she fell asleep once more. Yet in her sleep the needle of doubt ran through the little bits of memories, one by one, threading them in one continuous string. There was Bianca Corleone's look of blank surprise when Veronica had first spoken of a possible marriage with Bosio, and there was Taquisara's bold assertion, tallying with the priest's, that the Macomer wanted her fortune, and there was very vividly before her the gnawing anxiety she had seen in Matilde's face

until the latter had caught sight of the artificial flower on that memorable evening. And the string on which the beads of memory were threaded was her long-repressed but profound distrust of Gregorio Macomer. It had seemed a wicked prejudice, a gratuitously false judgment, based upon something in his face, and she had always fought against it as unworthy, besides being irrational. Then, too, there was the will she had signed a fortnight since, for the sake of peace. If there was nothing in what the priest had said, why had they been so terribly anxious to get the document executed without delay? It was scarcely natural. And there were fifty other details, turns of phrases, changes of expression, little words of Gregorio's spoken in an enigmatic tone to his wife, which Veronica had not understood, but which she had therefore remembered, and which could mean that he was on the verge of ruin, and in great trouble of mind about his affairs. Amidst the wildly shifting scenery of dreams, the little doll figures of abiding facts out of memory joined hands in procession, showing their faces one by one and their likeness to one another more and more clearly. Even in her dream, it flashed upon her that it might all be true except that one part of it which said that Bosio had loved Matilde and not herself. That was not true. He had loved her, Veronica; they had known it, and had taken advantage of it.

She did not blame them for that. She had been so fond of him, — she knew that she should soon have loved him, — and the dream swung back upon itself, and she was again standing beside the fire in the yellow room, with him so near to her. And after she awoke, she shed tears.

On that morning, after eleven o'clock, Matilde came to Veronica's room, bringing a piece of needlework with her, and she sat down to stay a while. They talked idly about dull subjects, and from time to time Matilde looked up and smiled sadly. She sat so that she could not see Bosio's photograph on the mantelpiece. After she had been there half an hour, she started, suddenly remembering something.

"I have done such a stupid thing!" she exclaimed, with an expression of annoyance. "I believe I am losing my memory!"

"What is it?" asked Veronica, naturally.

"I sent my maid out, just before I came to you, with a number of errands to do, and I forgot two things that I wanted very much. There was some medicine which I was to take before luncheon, and some jet beads that I needed. I do not care so much about the beads, but I need the medicine. I feel so horribly tired and weak, all the time."

"Send one of the men," suggested Veronica.

"A man could not buy jet things," objected Matilde. "You could not let Elettra go out for me,

could you? It is a fine morning, for a wonder, and she need not be gone more than half an hour."

"Certainly," answered Veronica, promptly. "She has nothing to do, and the walk will be good for her."

She rose and rang for her maid.

"I will go and get the recipe," said Matilde, rising, too. "It is an old one, given me by our poor doctor who died last year, and I kept it because it did me so much good. They will make it up in ten minutes. She can go and buy the jet, and stop for it on the way back. Will you tell her that she may go?"

Elettra had entered the room, and Veronica explained to her what she was to do.

"Put on your hat, Elettra," said Matilde, "and then please come to my room, and I will give you the recipe. I must find it among my things. I will be back presently, dear," she said to Veronica.

She went out, followed by the maid, who did as she was bidden and then went to Matilde's room. The countess explained exactly what sort of jet she wanted, and then gave her the recipe.

"Tell the chemist that this is only for two doses," she said, "but that I wish him to make up twenty doses, because I am going to take it regularly. Say that it is for me, and go to Casadio for it, where we get everything. Have it put down on the bill. Do you understand? Here are twenty

francs for the jet, but you will not need so much. You understand, do you?"

"Yes, Excellency."

Elettra stuck the little slip of paper, on which the recipe was written, into her shabby pocketbook without looking at it. She could read and write fairly well, and had been used to helping her husband the under-steward with his accounts at Muro, but even if she had looked at the recipe she would have understood nothing of the doctor's hieroglyphics and abbreviated Latin words. The prescription was for a preparation of arsenic, which Matilde had formerly taken for some time. The chemist would not make any difficulty about preparing twenty doses of it for the Countess Macomer, though the whole quantity of arsenic contained in so many would probably be sufficient to kill one not accustomed to the medicine, if taken all at once.

But though Matilde was so anxious to have the stuff before luncheon, she had a number of doses of it put away in a drawer, which she took out and counted, after Elettra had gone. She opened one of the little folded papers and looked at the fine white powder it contained, took a little on the end of her finger and tasted it. Then, from the same drawer, she took a package done up in coarser paper, and opened it likewise, looked at it, smelt it, and touched it with the tip of her tongue very cautiously indeed. It was white, too, but coarser

than the medicine. She was very careful in tasting it, and she immediately rinsed her mouth with water, before she tied up the package again, shut the drawer, and put the key into her pocket.

By and by Elettra came back and brought her the jet and the medicine, returning her the change without any remark. Matilde thanked her, and laid the package of twenty doses upon her dressing-table, before the mirror.

At luncheon, she persuaded Veronica to go out with her for a drive in the afternoon. She said that she felt ill and tired, and did not like to go alone. Gregorio said that he was too busy to accompany her, and it would not have been easy for Veronica to refuse. While it was still early, they drove out, past Bianca Corleone's house, over the hill, and down to Posilippo, on the other side. They talked very little, but Veronica enjoyed the bright afternoon air, after the long spell of bad weather. There was no dust, for the road was not yet dry, and a gentle land breeze just roughed the surface of the calm sea to a deeper blue. When they turned to drive home, there was already a purple mist about Vesuvius, and the great Sant' Angelo's crest was black against the sky, for these were the shortest days, and the sun set far to southward. It was almost dark when they got back to the city.

"Shall we have tea in your room?" asked Ma-

tilde as they went up the stairs together. "It is so dreary in the drawing-room."

"Certainly," answered Veronica, readily. "Yes — the rest of the house is horribly gloomy, now."

Matilde was behind her on the stairs, evidently fatigued, but as the young girl spoke, a look of detestation flashed across her worn face. She hated Veronica, now that Bosio was dead. But for Veronica, Bosio would still have been alive. There was more than the mere desperate determination to save herself, and her husband with her, in what Matilde did after that. But when they entered the hall, the look was quite gone from her face. She had been very gentle, all that morning and afternoon. They had talked a little of the incident that had occurred on the previous day, of Gregorio's feeling about not letting Veronica spend money uselessly. He was so conscientious, Matilde had said. Though the guardianship had expired, he still felt it his duty to watch his former ward's expenditure. And he was not charitable — no, it had always been a cause of regret to Matilde that Gregorio, with all his good qualities, was hard to poor people. Bosio had been different. Ah — poor Bosio!

She spoke gently, and sometimes there was a true ring in her voice which Veronica heard and understood, for it was quite genuine. And now, she seemed tired and weak — she who was so strong.

So they went to Veronica's room, and Elettra brought the tea things, and Matilde made tea, and they both drank it, and talked a little more, and gave the Maltese cat milk in a saucer, on the lower shelf of the little two-storied tea-table.

Afterwards, Matilde went away to her room, and Veronica remained alone after Elettra had taken away the things.

Before dinner, Elettra came and told her mistress that the countess was suddenly taken very ill, and was crying aloud with the pain she suffered. Veronica hastily went to her aunt, and found that a doctor had already come and was making her swallow olive oil out of a full tumbler. A servant followed her into the room with a plate full of raw eggs, and the doctor was asking for magnesia. Gregorio Macomer was standing by, shaking his head, and occasionally supporting his wife with one hand, when her strength seemed to be failing. Veronica took the other side, and the doctor stood before the sick woman.

"What is it, Doctor?" asked Veronica, after a moment. "What is the matter with her?"

The physician looked over his shoulder and saw that there was no servant in the room. "It is arsenic," he answered in a low voice. "She has been poisoned. But there was not enough to kill her — she will be quite well to-morrow."

"Poisoned!" exclaimed Veronica, in horrified

surprise. "By whom?" She looked at Gregorio, addressing the question to him.

He gravely raised his high shoulders and shook his head. Veronica expected to hear his awful laugh; but though his face twitched nervously, it did not come. He knew that the doctor might afterwards be an excellent witness to his peculiarities, in case he wished to prove himself insane; but on the other hand, had he shown any signs of insanity now, the doctor might have suspected him of having poisoned his wife. That would have been very unfortunate.

As the physician had foreseen, Matilde was soon better, and by bed-time she felt no ill effects from what had happened to her, beyond great weakness and lassitude. The doctor had asked many questions and had elicited the fact that Matilde had a preparation of arsenic in powders, which she took according to prescription, and which she showed him after the first spasms were passed. She assured him, however, that she had only taken one on that day, and had taken it just before luncheon. The rest of the powders were intact and still lay upon her toilet table. She showed them also. He took the next one, on the top of the pile, and said that he would examine it and ascertain whether the chemist had made any mistake. Then he went away, promising to come in the morning.

At last Matilde was alone with her husband.

Veronica had gone to bed, and Gregorio waited for an opportunity of questioning his wife.

"Whom do you suspect?" he asked, sitting down by her bedside.

"No one," she answered. "I took it on purpose. You need not be anxious. I pretended to suffer more than I did, and I do not mind the pain at all."

He stared at her, trying to fathom her thoughts, but he altogether failed to understand her.

"Why did you do it?" he asked, drawing the lids close together over his small eyes.

"You are so dull!" she answered. "You shall see. I cannot explain now. I have been really poisoned and I feel ill and weak. Do not go out to-morrow before I see you."

He left her, but she did not sleep all night. In spite of what she had gone through on that evening and of all the mental suffering of many days, she was stronger still than any one knew. It was between two and three in the morning when she lighted a candle, wrapped herself in a dressing-gown and began to make certain preparations for the day.

In the first place she locked both her doors very softly, and arranged a stocking over each keyhole, twisting it round the keys themselves. Then she got some stiff writing-paper, and a heavy ivory paper-knife, and from the locked drawers she took

that other package which was done up in coarse paper.

From this she took some of the rough, half-pulverized white stuff, laid it upon the marble top of the chest of drawers, and with the ivory paper-knife, pressing heavily, she little by little crushed it as fine as dust.

She then took nine of the eighteen little papers containing the arsenic, which were left, opened each one at the end and poured out the contents apart, into a little heap quite separate from the other. And of the other, she took a pinch for each little paper and dropped it in — about as much in quantity as she had taken out. Then she closed each of the papers, carefully slipping one folded end into the other as chemists do; when they were all closed, she made a tiny hole in each with the point of a needle, so that she should know the bad from the good, if necessary. This was only a precaution, and could do no harm. Then she arranged the good and the bad in their little packages of five, each in a tiny india-rubber band, laying bad ones and good ones alternately. When this was done, she put all the packages into the original paper, loosely opened, and laid them once more before her looking-glass, upon the toilet table. Her large white hands were exceedingly skilful, and it would have needed sharp eyes to see that the papers of medicine had been tampered with.

After this, she cut a sheet of the writing-paper into four square pieces, and very neatly made out of three of them three very small open boxes, for moulds, each of the size of a large lump of sugar, and she set them up side by side in a row. One was larger than the other two.

They had brought her powdered sugar, with the juice of a lemon in a glass and a decanter of water; she had said that if she were thirsty she would make herself a glass of lemonade in the night. She had also a bottle of ordinary sticking gum.

She took the sugar and mixed a very little with some of the stuff she had pulverized, and with a few drops of the gum, till it was a stiff, hard paste, and with the end of the paper-knife she carefully filled the largest of her three moulds with it. She was sure that it would be dry and hard by the next day, and it would have the size, the appearance, and somewhat the taste of a lump of sugar.

Then she halved the little heap of arsenic medicine as exactly as she could. There were nine powders in all. To produce the symptoms of poisoning in herself, she had taken four from her old supply, that evening. Half of nine would be four and a half, and that would not be too much. She mixed enough wet sugar and gum with each little pile to fill one of each of the smaller moulds, pressing the sticky mass firmly into the paper.

When all was finished, she carefully cleaned the

marble top of the chest of drawers, and threw what little of the coarser powder remained into the ashes of the fire, in which a few coals still glowed. The heat would consume the powder immediately.

Having done this, she set the three little moulds on the warm marble hearthstone to dry, took the remainder of the package of coarser powder, twisted the stiff paper closely, so that it should not open, took the stockings from the keyholes, and, candle in hand, left the room, locking the door softly behind her. She made no noise as she traversed the dim rooms, in her felt slippers; but she avoided the yellow drawing-room and passed through a passage behind it. Her nerves were singularly good, but since Bosio's death she did not like to be alone in that room at night. Bosio had been fond of dabbling in spiritism and such things, and they had often talked about the possibility of coming back after death, in that very room, promising each other that, if it were possible, the one who died first would try to communicate with the other. Matilde turned aside from the room in which they had said those things to each other.

She walked more and more cautiously as she came to the other end of the long apartment, where Veronica lived, and she stopped in a dark corridor before the door of Elettra's room. It was not ajar this time, but closed. Matilde did not hesitate, and began to turn the handle very slowly.

Then she pushed the door and looked in, shading her candle with her hand, from her eyes, so as to look over it. She had determined, if she found the woman in bed, to wake her boldly, to say that she felt ill again and to tell her to go and heat some water. That would have taken some time. But Elettra was not there, and the bed, as usual of late, was untouched.

Matilde looked about her hastily, at the same time extracting the package from the wide pocket of her dressing-gown. The furniture was scant and simple — the bed, a table covered with things belonging to Veronica, beside which lay sewing-materials, two chairs, a shabby chest of drawers, a deal washstand — that was all. Italian servants are not accustomed to very luxurious quarters. A couple of coarse, uncoloured prints of saints were tacked to the wall over the bed, and a bit of a dusty olive branch, from the last Palm Sunday, nine months ago, was stuck behind one of them.

Matilde looked about her, and hesitated a moment. Then, setting the candlestick down, she knelt upon the floor, and thrust the package as far as she could under the chest of drawers. Of all the things she had to do, in the course of that night and the following day, this was the only one with which any danger was connected, for at any moment Elettra might have come from Veronica's room to her own. The thing was possible, but not

probable, between three and four o'clock in the morning. It did not happen, and when Matilde left the room and softly closed the door behind her, all was safe.

Before she went to bed, she entered the dining-room, poured herself out a glass of strong Sicilian wine from a decanter on the sideboard and drank it at a draught, for she was very tired. She left the decanter and the glass on the table, so that any one might see them. If by any remote possibility some wakeful person had chanced to hear her moving about in the night, she would say that she had felt ill, and had left her room in order to find the stimulant. She thought of every possible detail which could in any way hereafter be brought up in evidence.

At last she went back to her room, unlocked the door, and locked herself in.

Her plan was simple, though the details of it were complicated, so far as the preparation was concerned. It was an extremely bold plan, but one not at all likely to fail in the execution. Almost all the difficulty had lain in the preparations, and she had spared no pains and no suffering for herself, in the preliminaries.

She knew the story of Elettra's husband very well, and of how he had been murdered by peasants near Muro in trying to collect the exorbitant rents Macomer had attempted to exact. She was

a good enough judge of character to see that Elettra had the revengeful disposition common to many of the southern hill people, and the woman's dark complexion, sombre eyes, and thin frame would all help to strengthen the impression in the mind of an unprejudiced judge.

She intended to make it appear that Elettra had poisoned the whole family, beginning with Matilde herself, out of revenge for her dead husband. Veronica was to die, but Gregorio and Matilde herself would only suffer a certain amount of pain for a few hours, and then recover. She had begun by half poisoning herself, both to remove all suspicion, and as a sort of experiment, to be sure that she was giving herself and her husband a sufficient amount to produce the real symptoms of poisoning by arsenic. No half measures, no mere acting, would be of any avail.

The stuff in the package wrapped in coarse paper was an almost pure salt of arsenic, sold by grocers as rat-poison.

The two small lumps of sugar and arsenic medicine were for herself and her husband; the large lump of almost pure poison was for Veronica.

In the examination which would follow upon the deed, the package of rat-poison would be found under the chest of drawers in the maid's room, half empty. It would be discovered that every alternate paper of Matilde's medicine had

been tampered with, and it would be supposed that Matilde had at the first time taken one of those containing poison, whereas the doctor who had attended her had taken the next, which was untouched and only had medicine in it.

She intended to make tea on the following afternoon in Veronica's room. She could easily find an excuse for bringing in Gregorio who, like many modern Italians, had acquired the habit of drinking tea every day. She herself would make the tea, and put in the sugar and cream. Elettra would, as usual, have brought in the tea-tray with the silver urn, for Veronica always preferred being served by her maid when she had anything in her own room. It would go hard, if Matilde could not divert Veronica's attention for one moment while she dropped the lumps into the cups, having concealed them in her handkerchief beforehand. There would be no servant in the room, for Elettra would have gone out. Gregorio would know beforehand what was to be done and would help to divert Veronica at the right moment. Arsenic had little or no taste, and Veronica would drink her cup readily like the rest.

She would die before the next morning. That was certain. Everything would tend to throw the suspicion of having attempted to commit a horrible wholesale murder, upon Elettra. The will could be kept back until the first uproar and excitement

should be over. Then Matilde would have the fortune, Gregorio would be saved, and Elettra would be condemned to penal servitude for life.

It was certainly a very bold plan, and Matilde did not see where it could fail.

CHAPTER XIV.

Matilde received on the following morning a curious letter which surprised and startled her. She had risen at last, grey and weary of face, with heavy eyes and drawn lips, to face the deed she meant to do. The sky was overcast, but it was not raining yet, though it soon would. She had risen before ringing for her maid, and had carefully removed the paper from the three little cakes of white stuff which she had made. It had to be done cleverly, for the smaller ones seemed likely to crumble; but the large one was quite consistent. She had hidden them all in the drawer she kept locked; then she had unfastened her door and had rung the bell. It was past nine o'clock, and her maid had brought her a letter with her coffee.

It was very short, but the few words it contained were exceedingly disquieting. It was accompanied by a card on which Matilde read 'Giuditta Astarita, Sonnambula,' and the address was below, in one corner. The few words of the letter, written in a subtle, sloping, feminine handwriting, correctly spelt and grammatically well expressed, ran as follows: —

"The spirit of B. M. wishes to make you an important communication and torments me continually. I pray you to come to me soon, on any day between ten and three o'clock. In order that you may be assured that it is really the spirit of B. M., and not a deceiving spirit, I am to remind you that on the evening of the ninth of this month, when you and he were alone together in a room which is all yellow, you laid your hand upon his head and stroked his hair and said: 'It is to save me.' The spirit tells me that you will remember this and understand it, and know that he is not a deceiving spirit."

Matilde read the short letter many times over, and her hands trembled when she at last folded it and returned it to its envelope. A sensation of curiosity and of ghastly horror ran through her hair, more than once, like a cool breeze, and with it came the infinite desire for some one word of truth out of the black beyond, from the one being whom she had loved so fiercely.

But in such things she was sceptical, and she sought to make some theory which should explain the writer of the letter into a common impostor. She could find none. She remembered the act and the words that had gone with it. Only she and Bosio had known, and he was dead — he had died four-and-twenty hours after she had touched his hair and had said: 'It is to save me.' And she

knew him well. He was not, under any circumstances, a man to speak of such things to a third person. Then, how did this Giuditta Astarita know what Matilde had said and done? It was not natural, and not natural meant supernatural — supernatural meant the possibility of communication, and she had loved the dead man with all her big, sinful soul.

It would be long before the time came for the deed, in the late afternoon, and the terrible day must be disposed of in some way or other. She was not afraid of going mad, nor of losing her nerve, nor of making a mistake at the last moment, but even to her courage and strength the hours before her were hours of fear.

She planned her day. The doctor would come, in the first place, at about ten o'clock. He would recommend her to be quiet, to take a little broth for luncheon, and a little more broth for dinner. She smiled grimly, as she thought of his probable instructions, and she knew what she could do and bear at pinch of pressing need. He would also tell her that the powder contained only just the right quantity of medicine, and that she must have been poisoned in some other way. She knew that.

Afterwards, Gregorio would need his instructions. He was to be at home in the afternoon, and to come and drink his tea in Veronica's room when Matilde sent for him. Just when Matilde was pouring out

the tea, he was to distract Veronica's attention from the tea-table for a moment. She would not tell him that she intended to half poison him, too, for he was a coward, and at the last minute, dreading pain, he would not drink from his cup. She knew that well enough. She would tell him when he began to suffer the effects, and assure him that he was not going to die. Again she smiled grimly, and chancing to be just then before the mirror, she saw that her face had all at once grown old since yesterday. And in spite of her strength of body and will, she felt weak and exhausted, and hated the hours that were to be between.

But when she had spoken to Gregorio, she would go out alone, on foot. And she knew that she should find the address given on Giuditta Astarita's card, and enter the house and see the woman who had written to her, and hear the message that was promised. If she left her own house, her feet must take her that way, whether she would or not.

And so it all happened just as she foresaw. But she had not known that in threading the intricate, dark streets she would almost forget what she was to do that day, in the mad hope of the one more word from beyond. She had not known that at the thought her eyes would brighten eagerly, the colour would come back to her cheeks, and the strength to her limbs as she walked. After all, the strongest thing that had ever been in her, or ever could be,

was that passionate, dominating, despotic devotion to one being; and the merest suggestion that he might not be gone quite beyond the reach of spiritual touch had power to veil the awful future of the day, when her hand was already uplifted to kill. She was not a woman to hesitate at the last moment, unstrung and womanishly trembling because the victim was young, and smiled, and had innocent eyes. And yet, perhaps, had she not gone that day to answer the spirit-seer's summons and to catch at the straw thrown to her from beyond the grave, she might have seen a reason for changing her mind, and all might have happened very differently. But Fate does not sleep, though she seems sometimes to nod and forget to kill.

Matilde came to the house as the clock struck eleven, and entered by the dark, arched door, and went up the damp, stone steps, as Bosio had done a fortnight earlier. She was admitted by the decent woman whose one eye was of a china blue, and she waited for Giuditta in the same small sitting-room, of which the one heavily curtained window looked out upon an inner court. She did not know that Bosio had ever been there, but in her thoughts of him she felt his presence, and turned, with a shiver under her hair, to look behind her as she stood waiting before the window, just where he had stood. The day was dark, and the room was all dim and cold, with its stiff, ugly furniture and its

bare, tiled floor. The corners were shadowy, and her eyes searched in them uneasily, and she would not turn her back upon them again and look out of the windows. Then the door opened noiselessly, and Giuditta Astarita entered, in her loose black silk gown, with her little bunch of charms against the evil eye, hanging by a chain from a button hole.

The china blue eyes looked steadily at Matilde, out of the unhealthy face, but the woman gave no sign to show that she knew who her visitor was. Her hoarse voice pronounced the usual words: "You wish to consult me?"

"You wrote to me. I am the Countess Macomer," answered Matilde, lifting her veil, which was a thick one.

The expression in the woman's eyes did not change, but she still looked steadily at Matilde for three or four seconds.

"Yes," she said. "I thought so. I am glad that you have come, for I have suffered much on your account."

She looked as though she were suffering, Matilde thought. Then she placed the chairs, made the countess sit down, and drew the curtains, just as she had done for Bosio.

Then, in the dark, there was silence. It seemed to Matilde a long time, and she grew nervous, and moved uneasily. Then, without warning, she heard

that other voice, clear, deep, and bell-like, which Bosio had heard, and she trembled.

"I see a name written on your breast, — Bosio Macomer."

The darkness, the voice, the shiver of anticipation, unnerved the strong woman.

"What does he say to me?" she asked unsteadily.

Again there was a long silence, longer than the first, and by many degrees more disturbing to Matilda, as she waited for the answer.

"Bosio loves you," said the voice. "He is watching over you. He tells you to remember what you promised each other in the room that is all yellow, long ago, — that the one that should die first would visit the other. He tells you that it is possible, and that he has kept his promise. He loves you always, and you will be spirits together."

Matilde felt that in the darkness she was horribly pale, but she was no longer frightened.

"Will he come to me when I am alone?" she asked, and her voice did not shake.

"I will ask him," answered the clear voice, and again there was silence, but only for a few seconds. "This is his answer," continued the voice. "He cannot come to you when you are alone, as yet. By and by he will come. But he watches over you. For the present he can only speak with you through Giuditta Astarita, who is now asleep."

"Is she asleep?" asked Matilde.

"She is in a trance," the voice replied. "I speak through her, but when she awakes, she will not know what I have said. The spirits come to her directly sometimes, when she is awake, and they torment her. Bosio has been coming to her often, and has made her suffer, until she wrote to you. The spirits themselves suffer when they wish to communicate with the living, and cannot."

"What are you?" inquired Matilda.

"I am Giuditta's familiar. The spirits generally speak, through me, to her, when she is in the trance."

"And she knows nothing of what you say?"

"Nothing, after she is awake."

"Is Bosio suffering now?" asked Matilde, gravely but eagerly, after a moment's pause.

"I will ask him." And another brief pause followed. "Yes," continued the voice. "He is suffering because he has left you. He suffers remorse. He cannot be happy unless he can communicate with you."

"Can you see him? Can you see his face?"

"Yes," replied the voice, without hesitation. "He is very pale. His hair is soft, brown, and silky, with a few grey streaks in it. His eyes are gentle and tender, and his beard is like his hair, soft and like silk. He is as you last saw him alive, when you kissed him by the fireplace in the room that is yellow, just before he died. He loves you, as he did then."

Such evidence of unnatural knowledge might have convinced a more sceptical mind than Matilde's of the fact that the somnambulist could at least read her thoughts and memories from her mind as from a book. It was impossible that any one but herself could know how, and in what room, she had kissed him for the last time, a few minutes before his end. Again the cold shiver ran under her hair, and she could not speak again for a few moments.

"Does he know what I am going to do to-day?" she asked at last, in a very low voice.

"I will ask him."

The silence which followed was the longest of all that there had been.

"I cannot see him any more," said the voice, speaking more faintly. "He is gone. He will communicate with you again. I cannot find him. Giuditta is tired — she will —" The last words were hardly audible, and the voice died away altogether.

In the dark, Matilde heard something like a yawn, as of a person waking from sleep. Then Giuditta's croaking voice spoke to her.

"I am tired," she said. "The spirits have kept me a long time. Did you hear anything that you wished to hear?"

"Yes. I heard much."

While Matilde was speaking, the woman drew the curtain back, and the dull steel light of the

gloomy day filled the small room. But after the darkness it was almost dazzling. Matilde looked at Giuditta's face, and saw the same staring, china eyes, and the same listless expression in the unhealthy features. She had felt a sensation of relief when the voice had been unable to answer the last question she had asked; for she still thought that there might be a doubt as to Giuditta's total forgetfulness on waking. But that doubt was greatly diminished by the woman's indifferent and weary look.

"I hope that he will not torment me so much after this," said Giuditta. "I have lost my sleep for several nights."

Matilde, believing that the somnambulist was one person when awake and quite another when asleep, did not care to enter into conversation with her in her present state. The vivid, terrible future of the day returned to her mind, too. She had been momentarily unstrung and was in haste to be gone and to be alone. She had her purse in her hand, and stood still a moment, hesitating.

"I generally ask twenty-five francs for a consultation," said Giuditta. "But I am so much obliged to you for coming to free me from this obsession, that I shall not charge anything to-day."

"No," answered Matilde, quietly. "I am not accustomed to receiving anything without paying for it. But I thank you."

She laid the money upon the polished table, beside the volumes in their gilt bindings.

"Very well," said Giuditta. "If you desire it, I thank you. If you should wish to come again, I am always to be found between ten and three o'clock."

"I will come again," answered Matilde.

She passed through the door while Giuditta held it open for her, and in the passage she was met by the one-eyed woman. But she was more unnerved and less observant than Bosio had been, and she did not notice the extraordinary resemblance between the colour of the woman's one eye and that of Giuditta's two. She descended the stairs slowly, feeling dizzy at the turnings, but steadying herself as she went down each straight flight. She made her way quickly to the nearest large thoroughfare and took the first passing cab to get home, for she felt that she had not strength left to walk much more on that day.

She had a moment of weakness and doubt, as she went up her own stairs, knowing that in half an hour she must sit down to table with Gregorio and with Veronica. It would be the last time, for Veronica would never sit down with them again. She had not realized exactly how it was to be. Henceforth, at that table, two places were to be vacant, of two persons dead within a fortnight, the one by his own hand, the other by hers; and from

that day, when she and her husband sat there, the shadows of those two would be between them always.

She paused on the staircase, and steadied herself with her hand against the wall. She knew that from now until it was done, she should have no moment in which she could allow herself the pitiful luxury of feeling weak. And as she stood there, and thought of the strange messages she had but now received from beyond the grave, she felt the terror of what the dead man's spirit might say to her when all was done, and Veronica lay dead in her own room upstairs — in this coming night.

The fear followed her up the steps like a living thing, its hand on her shoulder, its cold lips close to her ears, breathing fright and whispering terror. And it went in with her to her own room, and kept freezing company with her throughout a long half-hour of mental agony. It could not bend her, but it almost broke her. If she could stand and walk and see, she would go to Veronica's room that afternoon and kill her. She hated her, too. She hated her all the more bitterly because she felt afraid to kill her, and knew that she must conquer her fear before she could do it. She hated her most savagely because, but for her, Bosio Macomer would still have been alive. As though she had been herself about to die, the great pictures of her own past rose in fierce colours, and faced her with vivid life in

the very midst of death. And with them came the clear echo of that bell-like voice she had heard speaking message for message between her and the man she had lost.

Her soul was not in the balance, for the die was cast and the deed was to be done. But she suffered then, as though she had still been free to choose. She was not. The atrocious vision of an infamous disgrace stood between her and all possibility of relenting. She saw again the coarse striped clothes, the cropped hair, the hands and feet shackled in irons, the hideous faces of women murderers and thieves around her. Well, that was the alternative, if she let Veronica live — all that, or death.

Of course, in such a case she would have chosen death. But it was characteristic of her that from beginning to end she never thought of taking her own life. She was too vital by nature. She had loved life long and well; she loved it even now that it was not worth living. She never even asked herself the question, whether it would not be better and easier to end all and leave Gregorio to his fate. Gregorio! Her smooth lip curled in contempt. A coward, a thief, a fool — why should she care what became of him? Coldly and sincerely she wished that she were going to kill him, and not Veronica. She despised the one, and hated the other; of the two, she would rather have let the hated one live. But to die herself seemed absurd to her, because

she really feared death with all her heart, and clung to life with all her strong, vital nature. If the lives of all Naples could have saved her own, death should have had them all, rather than take hers. To live was a passion of itself — even to live lonely, with a despicable and hated companion in the consciousness of the enormous and irrevocable crime by which that living was to be secured to her.

There was a common, straight-backed chair in the room, between the chest of drawers and the wall. Through that interminable half-hour she sat upright upon it, her hands folded upon her knees, quite cold and motionless, her eyes closed, and her lips parted in an expression of bodily pain. Then she rose suddenly, all straight at once, tall and unbending, and stood still while one might have counted ten, and she opened and shut her eyes slowly, two or three times, as though she were comparing the outer world with that within her. So Clytemnestra might have stood, before she laid her hands to the axe.

She did not mean to be alone again until all was over. It would be easier then. She would have her own bodily pain to bear. There would be confusion in the house — doctors — screaming women — trembling men-servants — her husband's groans; for he was a coward, and would bear ill the little suffering which would help to save him. Then

they would tell her that Veronica was dead; and then — then she could sleep for hours, nights, days, calmly, and at rest.

She bathed her tired face in cold water, and went to face them at luncheon. With iron will, she ate and drank and talked, bearing herself bravely, as some great actresses have acted out their parts, while death waited for them at the stage door.

Had the weather been fine, she would have persuaded Veronica to drive with her, as on the previous day. But it was dark and gloomy, and there would be rain before night. She talked with the young girl, and began to make plans with her for going away. Gregorio ate nothing, and looked on, uttering a monosyllable now and then, and laughing frantically, two or three times. Nobody paid any attention to his laughter, now, for the household had grown used to it. It might break out just when a servant was handing him something; the man would merely draw back a step, and wait until the count was quiet again, before offering the dish.

Over their coffee, Matilde read fragments of news from the day's paper, and made comments on what was happening in the world. Veronica thought her unnaturally talkative and excited, but put it down to the reaction after the poisoning of the previous night. Matilde drank two cups of coffee instead of one. Macomer smoked one ciga-

rette after another, and sent for a sweet liqueur, of which he swallowed two glasses. He did not look at Veronica, when he could avoid doing so.

At last Matilde rose and asked Veronica to allow her to bring her work and sit with her in her room, to which the young girl of course assented.

"By and by, we will have tea there," said Matilde. "Perhaps you will let your uncle come and have a cup with us — he always drinks tea in the afternoon."

"Certainly," answered Veronica, quietly. "Will you come at four o'clock, Uncle Gregorio? Or is that too early?"

"Thank you. I will come at four, my dear," said Gregorio; and Matilde saw that his knees shook as he moved.

In Veronica's room the two women sat through the early part of the afternoon, and still Matilde talked almost continuously. That was the only outward sign that she was not in her usual state, and Veronica scarcely noticed it, for as the time wore on, she spoke less excitedly, and more often waited for an answer to what she said. Of course, the conversation turned for some time upon what had occurred on the preceding evening. Matilde scouted the idea that any one had attempted to poison her. It was perfectly clear, she said, that, although the paper which the doctor had carried away to examine only contained exactly the right

amount of medicine, the one from which Matilda had taken her dose must have had too much in it. She was quite out of the habit of taking arsenic, too, and a very slight overdose would always produce the symptoms of poisoning. Veronica could see that she had felt no serious ill effects from the accident. As for thinking that any one had given her poison intentionally, it was utterly and entirely absurd. Matilde refused to entertain the idea even for a moment, and presently she went on to speak of other things, and soon fell back upon making plans for the winter. She did not allow the conversation to flag, for she feared lest Veronica should be tired of sitting in her room and suddenly propose to go somewhere else, just for the sake of the change. It was essential to Matilde's plan that Elettra should bring the things for tea.

She did not allow herself to think, and she succeeded in staving off silence. Now that the deed was so near, it seemed unreal. Once she touched her handkerchief in her pocket, and felt the three prepared lumps concealed in it, to assure herself that she was not imagining all she had done, and meant to do. Then, suddenly, she felt that her brow was moist, a thing she could hardly remember having noticed before in her life. But the moisture disappeared almost instantly, and her skin was dry and burning.

Then the time came, and it was four o'clock.

Elettra opened the door and brought in the tea things on a large silver tray, set them down, and went to get the little tea-table, that was made with a shelf below, between the four legs, as a table with two stories.

"Let me make it," said Matilde, cheerfully; "I like to do it."

She laid down her work, and Elettra set the table before her knees, with its high silver urn, and all the necessary little implements. Veronica found herself on the other side of it, for Matilde had carefully chosen her seat when she had first come, placing herself in such a way with regard to Veronica as to make the present result almost inevitable unless the girl moved into a very inconvenient position.

The big grey Maltese cat came in through the still open door, in the hope of cream at the tea hour, as usual. The creature rubbed itself along Elettra's skirt while she was lighting the spirit lamp under the urn, which contained water already almost boiling.

"Will you kindly call the count?" said Matilde, addressing the maid.

Elettra left the room, and Matilde settled herself to make the tea, as women do, raising her elbow a little on each side and then dropping them again, bending her face down to see whether the lamp were burning well, opening the teapot, pouring a

little hot water into it, opening and shutting the tea-caddy, and settling each spoon in each saucer in a dainty and utterly futile way.

The cat rubbed its grey sides against Veronica's skirt and against her little slipper, as she sat there, one knee crossed over the other. The young girl bent down and stroked it, and hesitated, looking at the tea-table, and not wishing to disturb the things to take a saucer for the cat until the tea was made. As she bent down, Matilde took her handkerchief quietly from her pocket and laid it quite naturally in her lap. Veronica, being on the other side of the table and the urn, could not possibly see what she did.

Gregorio came in. Elettra had opened the door from without, for him to pass. She stood on the threshold a moment, and looked towards the table, to see whether anything had been forgotten. Then she closed the door, and went away, leaving the three together. The water boiled almost immediately; and Gregorio was just sitting down when Matilde poured the water out of the teapot, and put in the tea. She filled the pot, and leaned back in her chair, to allow it to draw a few moments.

The silence was intense during several seconds. Only the purring of the cat was heard, as Veronica, letting her arm hang down without stooping, gently rubbed its broad head. It pushed itself under her hand, bending its back to her caress, turned quickly,

and pushed its head under her hand once more, doing the same thing again and again.

Matilde sat upright, lifted the cover of the tea-pot an instant, and then began to move the cups. Veronica, whose thoughts were intent upon the animal she was touching, and which, as she knew, was begging for cream, immediately leaned forward, and took from under the silver cream jug a saucer which Elettra had especially brought for the purpose. She poured a little cream into it, and, bending down, placed it on the lower shelf of the tea-table, and gently pushed the cat towards it.

Matilde saw her opportunity, while Veronica was stooping; and in that moment she distributed the three lumps from her handkerchief in the three cups before her, and at once began to pour tea into the one containing the largest lump. The cat, for some reason, wished the saucer to be set upon the floor; and Veronica still bent down, until it sprang lightly upon the lower shelf, and began the slow and dainty operation of lapping the cream.

During all this, Gregorio, anxious to seem unaware of anything extraordinary, and not really knowing how his wife meant to put the poison into the tea, was nervously looking away from her, sometimes towards the window, at the fast-fading light of the grey afternoon on the opposite house, and sometimes at Veronica's head as she bent down. When she looked up, Matilde was holding out her

cup to her, having put some cream into it and a lump of real sugar to really sweeten the tea.

Veronica thanked her, drew a little nearer to the table, held her cup on her knee, and took a thin slice of bread and butter, which she proceeded to eat, stirring the tea slowly with her left hand.

Matilde meanwhile filled the other two cups, and handed one to her husband, who took it in silence, unsuspectingly.

"I can never understand why the tea we make here is better than mine," she said, smiling. "It is the same tea, of course. But it certainly is better in your room."

"Is it?" asked Veronica, carelessly and looking down at the cup she held on her knee, while she slowly stirred the contents.

As though to verify Matilde's assertion, she bent a little, raised the cup, and tasted the liquid. It was still too hot to drink, and she stirred it again on her knee. She noticed that although it had been sweet enough to her taste, there was a lump of sugar, not yet dissolved, still in the cup: she never took but one piece, and her aunt had evidently put in two.

Still holding the cup on her knee, where Matilde could not possibly see it, she quietly fished the superfluous piece of sugar out with her teaspoon, and bending down again she deposited it in the saucer from which the cat was lapping the last

drops of cream. She noticed that it was only dissolved at the corners, but she had observed before that one sometimes finds a lump of sugar which remains hard a long time. The cat would eat it, for it liked sugar, as some cats do.

Then she filled the cat's saucer again. By that time what she had was cooler, and she drank some of it.

"It is certainly very good tea," she said thoughtfully. "I think you probably make it better than I do."

As she drank again, Gregorio's unearthly laugh cracked and jarred in the room. But neither he nor his wife had seen what Veronica had done. They were staring hard at each other, and for the second time Matilde felt that her brow was moist.

END OF VOL. I.

TAQUISARA

VOL. II

TAQUISARA.

CHAPTER XV.

The Maltese cat died before six o'clock. The poor creature suffered horribly, and Elettra carried it off to her room that Veronica might not see its agony. But Veronica followed her maid. Elettra had laid the beast upon a folded rug on the floor and knelt beside it. It seemed half paralyzed already, but when Veronica knelt down, too, and tried to caress it, the cat sprang from them both in sudden terror. It stood still an instant, wagging its head while its shoulders contracted violently. Then it glided under the chest of drawers to die alone, if possible, after the manner of animals of prey. The girl and her maid heard its rattling breathing and its convulsions: its body thumped against the lower drawer. Then, while Veronica listened and Elettra bent, candle in hand, till her face touched the floor, to see it and get it out, all at once it was quiet.

"Get up," said Veronica, nervously, for she was fond of the creature. "Help me to move the chest of drawers out. Then we can get it out."

"It is dead," answered Elettra, still on the floor, and thrusting her long, thin arm under the piece of furniture. "But I cannot pull him out," she added. "He is so big!"

She got upon her feet, and together, without much difficulty, the two dragged the chest of drawers away from the wall, and then bent down behind it, with the candle, to look at the dead animal.

"It is quite dead," said Elettra. "Poor beast! What can have happened to it?" Veronica was really sorry, but of the two the maid had been the more fond of the cat. "It must have eaten something."

Elettra looked up, suspiciously, and Veronica drew back a step, half straightening herself. Her foot touched something close to the wall. She stooped again and picked up the package of rat-poison which Matilda had hidden under the chest of drawers on the previous night. She looked at it closely. It had evidently not lain long where she had found it, for there was no dust on it, and the coarse paper had an unmistakably fresh look. The indication of the contents was written upon it in ink, in illiterate characters.

"It is rat-poison!" exclaimed Veronica. "The cat must have eaten some of it! How did it come here?"

She looked at her maid curiously.

"The cat could not have wrapped it up and folded in the ends of the paper," observed Elettra.

"That is true."

They looked at each other, in considerable astonishment. Then they talked about it. Veronica asked whether Elettra had complained that there were mice in her room, and whether some stupid servant, having a package of rat-poison at hand, had not stuck it under the chest of drawers, not even thinking of opening the paper. Elettra was suspicious.

"At all events, Excellency," she said, "remember that you found it, and that it was carefully closed."

Suddenly, as they were speaking together, Veronica's face changed, and she grasped the corner of the piece of furniture convulsively. Though she had taken the poisoned lump from her cup in time to save her life, enough had been dissolved already to make her very ill.

Again there was dire confusion and fear in the Palazzo Macomer, by night. It was a wholesale poisoning. Veronica, Matilde, and Gregorio were all seized nearly at the same time.

Several of the servants left the house within half an hour after it was known that their masters were all poisoned. Within a fortnight, Bosio Macomer had killed himself and there had been two poisonings. Matilde's maid and a housemaid, the cook, and the butler went quietly to their several

rooms, took the most valuable of their own possessions, and slipped out. They felt that the house was doomed, with every one in it. But some one had gone for the doctor, and he arrived in a short time. Matilde, to whom all the proper antidotes had been given on the previous day, might have taken them at once, but in the first place, weak and still suffering the consequence of the first dangerous experiment, she was almost unconscious with pain, and secondly, if she had taken an antidote herself, it would have seemed strange that she should not administer it to Veronica, or at least send some one to the young girl to do so. Gregorio lay howling with pain in his room. But Matilde had warned him that it would come, after they had left Veronica's room together, and he knew that everything depended on his not hinting at the truth.

The doctor came to Matilde first. Far away, at the other end of the house, Elettra was with Veronica. She had known what they had done for the countess on the preceding evening, and while the servants were screaming and running hither and thither through the apartments, like scared sheep, the woman had quietly got oil and warm water, and was giving both to her mistress. She knew that a footman had gone for the doctor. When Veronica had first been seized with pain, Elettra had thrust the package of poison into her own pocket, and it was still there.

By the time the antidote began to act, Elettra believed that the doctor must be in the house. Not wishing to leave Veronica even for a moment, she rang the bell. But no one came. The woman suspected that the doctor had gone first to Matilde, and she decided in a moment that it was better to leave her mistress alone for two or three minutes than not to have the physician's assistance at once. She hastened to Matilde's room. As she passed a half-open door the package of poison in her pocket struck against the door-post and reminded her of its presence, if she needed reminding.

The doctor was bending over Matilde, who seemed very weak. As Elettra entered, she saw that there was no one else in the room. A drawer in a piece of furniture stood open as Matilde had left it, and as Elettra passed, she dropped the package in, and with a movement of her hand covered it with some folded handkerchiefs, from a little heap, shutting the drawer with a quick push. Neither Matilde nor the doctor saw her do it. As Elettra spoke to the doctor, the countess started at the sound of her voice. She thought the maid had come to say that Veronica was dead. Almost violently the woman dragged the physician away with her, and Matilde smiled in the midst of her sufferings.

It would be useless to chronicle the details of

the night and of the following morning. The three poisoned persons were almost recovered within twelve hours. Of the servants who had fled, Matilde's maid was the first to come back when she learned that no one was dead.

As the night wore on towards dawn, and the countess learned that Veronica was alive and not at all likely to die, she silently turned her face to the wall and tore her pocket-handkerchief slowly with her teeth. In the morning, when the doctor was there, the maid was alone in the room, arranging things as quickly as she could, and hoping that in the confusion of the previous night, her absence might not have been observed. In the drawer, amongst the handkerchiefs and other things, she came upon the package, looked at it in surprise, turned it round and round, and read the words written on it. Then, thinking that she had discovered the clue to the attempted wholesale murder, and that she might obtain pardon for her defection, she came to the bedside and held it up to the doctor. He, too, looked at it, and read the words. Matilde's heavy eyes opened, and then stared as she recognized the package. She thought that of course it had been found in Elettra's room, and was sure of the answer, when she put the question to her maid.

"Where did you find it?" she asked faintly.

"In the drawer, here, Excellency."

"In the drawer!" cried Matilde, starting up, and leaning on her elbow, as though electrified. "In the drawer? Here, in my room? Why — it was —"

Her head sank back, and her eyes closed. She had nearly betrayed herself, for she was very weak.

"It was not there yesterday — I am sure of it," she said feebly.

"Give it to me," said the doctor, sternly, and he put it into his pocket.

All that day Matilde lay in her room. Gregorio had recovered. He came to her, and when they were alone, he reproached her bitterly and upbraided her in unmeasured language for her failure. Veronica was alive, and his terror of the ruin before him grew stronger with the physical weakness. He was a coward always, but he was now half mad with fear. He laughed hideously, and his face twitched. He sawed the air with extraordinary gestures while he walked up and down in his wife's room, speaking excitedly in a low tone. Matilde turned to the wall and answered nothing. For she could not have found anything to say.

From time to time, during the day, she had news of Veronica. Elettra never left her mistress but once, shortly before twelve o'clock. She went out for a quarter of an hour, and came back bringing fresh eggs, bread, and wine, which she had bought herself.

"It is poor fare, Excellency," she said, as she boiled the eggs in the tea-urn, "but it is safe. If you are strong enough this afternoon, we will go away. This is not a good house. I do not understand what was done; but it was done to kill you and not to hurt them."

"I think it was," said Veronica. "I am not frightened, but I do not think that I am safe here."

After she had eaten a little and drunk some wine, she felt stronger and wrote a line to the Princess Corleone, asking the latter to receive her for a few days, as she was in trouble. In an hour she had an answer. Bianca, of course, was ready for her whenever she might come. Elettra quickly began to pack such things as her mistress might need immediately.

Veronica lay still, listening to Elettra's movements in the next room. In a flash she had guessed half the truth, and reflexion now brought her most of the rest. She remembered Don Teodoro's earnest face and the quiet eyes that had looked at her through the silver spectacles while he had been speaking. There had been conviction in them, and even then she had felt that he believed the truth of what he said, however mistaken he might be. And now she felt that it was not he who had spoken, but Bosio, through him, that the warning came from beyond the grave,

and that she had risked her life in disregarding it. She believed that Bosio had been a truthful man, and each detail of what had happened fitted itself to the next, to make up the whole story which the priest had told her. All but Bosio's love for Matilde, and in that Don Teodoro had misunderstood him. He might have loved her in the past. That was possible, and to the young girl's mind, in comparison with all that had recently happened, the wrong of that love dwindled to an insignificant detail. She had not been near enough to loving the man herself to be jealous of his past. And she was glad that he had not told Don Teodoro of his love for herself.

The rest all grew to distinctness and to the coincidence of the fact with the warning. She was brave enough to face danger as well as a man, but there was no reason why she should stay where she was, waiting to be murdered. She had a right to save herself without despising herself as a coward. She therefore said nothing to stop Elettra in her preparations, and the maid silently went on with her work in the other room.

She still felt ill and terribly shaken, but she rose softly, to try her strength, and she found that after the first moment's dizziness she could stand and walk alone. She looked at her hands, and she thought that they had shrunk and were thinner than ever. Then she lay down again and called

Elettra, and bade her prepare her own belongings and then come and dress her, when she should have finished.

"Yes, Excellency."

That was almost all that the woman had said, since she had boiled the eggs for her mistress's luncheon, and Veronica herself did not speak except to give an order about some detail of the packing. It would have been impossible to talk of what had happened without speaking clearly about Matilde, and Veronica did not wish to do that, though Elettra was of her own people and devotedly attached to her.

Elettra had been careful that no one in the household should learn her mistress's intention of leaving the palace. Veronica intended to go away in a cab, and it would be the question of a moment only to call one. When all was ready, Elettra went out for that purpose herself, and Veronica went without hesitation to Matilde's room. When she entered, the countess was alone, propped with pillows on a low couch near the fire. Her large white hands lay listlessly upon the dark shawl that was drawn over her, and she had thrown a piece of thick black lace over her head. It was nearly four o'clock, and the light was already waning, so that, as she lay with her back to the window, Veronica could hardly see her face. She raised her head slowly

and wearily as the young girl entered, and then started visibly, as she recognized her.

"It is I," said Veronica, when she had closed the door.

She came and stood beside the couch on which her aunt lay, and she looked down at the reclining woman. Matilde's listless hands suddenly clasped each other.

"Yes," she answered, with an effort. "Are you going out? Are you well enough to go out?" she asked, adding the last question quickly.

"I should go if I were much more ill than I have been," Veronica replied. "I am not coming back."

"Not coming back?" Surprise brought energy into Matilde's voice.

"No. I am not coming back. Do not be astonished. I understand what has happened, and I am going to a safer place."

"What? How? I do not understand." Matilde spoke rapidly and unsteadily. "You must stay here — Gregorio is going to send for the chief of police — there will be an inquiry, and you must answer questions — we suspect one of the servants, who has a grudge against your uncle, and who has tried to murder us all in revenge — "

"Yes," said Veronica, calmly. "It was well arranged, I am sure. If I had not found the rat-poison under the chest of drawers in Elettra's room, you might have thrown suspicion upon her,

because her husband was murdered at Muro. If I had not found my tea too sweet, I should not have taken out the second piece and given it to the cat. The taste I had of it almost killed me — you have explained the rest to me now. But I knew all that I needed to know."

Matilde put her feet to the ground and slowly rose to her feet while Veronica was speaking. Then she laid her two hands upon the girl's shoulders and stared into her face.

"Do you dare to accuse me of trying to poison you?" she asked in a low, fierce voice.

"Take your hands from me!" cried Veronica, thrusting her back. "Call your husband. I will accuse you both — you and him."

They were women of the same race and name, and both brave. But the elder and stronger felt her nerves growing weak in her when she heard the other's voice. Perhaps courageous people recognize courage and conviction in others more easily than cowards can. Matilde hesitated.

"Call him!" repeated Veronica, in a tone of command. "I insist upon it. He shall hear what I have to say."

"I will call him, that he may see for himself that you are quite mad," answered Matilde. "That is," she added, "if he is well enough to come here from his room." And she moved slowly towards the door.

"If I am alive, he is well enough to hear me speak," said the young girl.

Matilde stopped, turned, and faced her a moment, as though about to speak angrily. Then she went on. It was best, on the whole, to call her husband, she thought, though her reasoning was confused and uncertain. In her view of matters, the burden of the crime she had tried to commit all fell upon him, and she was willing that he should face Veronica, and realize what he had done. At the same time she believed herself so safe as still to be able to throw the suspicion entirely upon Elettra, though Veronica would protect her. Moreover, though she would not have admitted the fact, her strength was momentarily so broken that she felt it easier to obey the young girl than to visit her and fight out the interview alone.

Veronica did not move while she was gone, but stood quite still, watching the door. She was very pale, with illness and rising anger, but she was not weak, as Matilde was. She had not gone through half so much. Presently Matilde returned, followed by Macomer, wrapped in a dark velvet dressing-gown, his face white and twitching, his usually smooth grey beard unbrushed, and his grey hair in disorder. With drawn lids he looked at Veronica, and in his terror he tried to smile, but there was something at once cowardly and insolent in the expression — there was something else, too,

which the young girl did not understand, a sort of vacancy of the brow and unnatural weakness of the mouth.

"I am glad that you have come," she said, when the door was shut. "I have not much to say, and I wish you to hear it."

They were all standing. Gregorio steadied himself by the head of the couch, and was as erect as ever.

"I will tell you something which you do not know," said Veronica, fixing her eyes on him. "Before Bosio died he told the whole truth to Don Teodoro Maresca, his friend. And the day after his death, Don Teodoro came and told it all to me."

"Bosio!" exclaimed Gregorio, his knees shaking. "Bosio told —"

"What did Bosio tell?" asked Matilde, interrupting her husband in a loud voice to cover any mistake he might be about to make.

But Veronica had seen Macomer's face and had heard his tone of dread. Whatever doubts she still had, disappeared for the last time.

"He told his friend the whole truth about your management of my fortune," she answered steadily. "He told how you had lost your own in speculation and had taken everything of mine upon which you could lay hands — all my income and much more, so long as you were still my guardian — you and Lamberto Squarci, helping each other.

And I understand now why you would not give me that money the other day. You had not got it to give me. My aunt must have borrowed it. And Bosio told Don Teodoro, that unless he was married to me, you meant to kill me, because I had signed a will leaving you everything. There was nothing that Bosio did not tell, and Don Teodoro repeated every word of it to me. I thought him mad. But now I know that he was not. I have been saved by a miracle, but you shall not try to murder me again — so I am going away."

Macomer had listened to the end, his face working horribly and his hands grasping the head of the couch. When Veronica paused, his head fell forward as he stood. Even Matilde could not speak, for a moment. The revelation that Bosio had told all before he died, and that Veronica knew it, fell upon her like a blow, with stunning force. The first words came from Gregorio.

"Bosio!" he exclaimed in a loud voice. "The devil take his soul!"

"God will have mercy upon the soul that was lost through your deeds," said the young girl, solemnly. "Amongst you, you drove him to madness — it was not his fault. But for his soul you shall answer, as well as for your deeds — and that is much to answer for, to Heaven and to me. You neither of you have the strength to deny one word of what Bosio said —"

"He was mad!" Matilde broke in. "You are mad, too —"

"Oh no!" interrupted Veronica, with contempt. "You cannot fasten that upon me. I am not mad at all, and I will show you what it is to be sane, for I know that every word of what Bosio told Don Teodoro was true. I was foolish not to believe it at once — it almost cost my life to believe you better than you are."

"He was quite insane," muttered Gregorio, in almost imbecile repetition of what his wife had said.

Matilde made another great effort to impose her remaining strength upon the young girl.

"Whether you are mad or not, you shall not stand there accusing me of monstrous crimes!" she cried, moving a step towards Veronica, and raising her hand with a menacing gesture.

"Shall not?" repeated Veronica, proudly, and instead of retreating she advanced calmly to meet her aunt.

"Would you not rather that I accused you here, and proved you guilty and let you go free, than that I should do as much in a court of justice? You know what the end of that would be — penal servitude for you both — and unless —" she paused, for she was growing hot and she wished to speak with coolness.

"Unless?" Matilde uttered the one word scornfully, still facing her.

"Unless you will confess the truth, here, before I leave the house, I will do what I can to have you both convicted," said Veronica. "That is your only chance. That or the galleys. Choose. You are thieves and murderers. Choose."

She spoke like a man to those who would have murdered her and had failed, but who had robbed her with impunity for years. Gregorio Macomer's face was all distorted. All at once his maniac laugh broke out. But it stopped suddenly and unexpectedly, and it changed to another sort of laughter — low and not unpleasant to hear, but a little vacant. Matilde turned her head slowly and gazed at him. He was bending now and resting his elbows on the head of the couch, instead of his hands, and he held his hands themselves opposite to each other, crooking first one finger and then another, and making one finger bow to the other, as children sometimes do, and laughing vacantly to himself, with a queer little chuckle of enjoyment. Veronica stared. Matilde held her breath. Still he laughed softly.

"Marionettes," he said, looking up at his wife, his little eyes wide open. "Do you see the marionettes? This is Pulcinella. This is his wife. Do you see how they quarrel? Is it not pretty? I always like to see the marionettes in the streets. Ha! ha! ha! see them!"

And he played with his fingers and made them bob and bow, like little dolls.

"He is ill," said Matilde, in a low, uneasy voice. "Pay no attention to him."

He had always intended to save himself by pretending to go mad, but even Matilde was amazed at his power of acting.

"He will recover," answered Veronica, coldly. "You can still understand me, at all events, even if he cannot. You have your choice. If you tell me the truth, I will not allow any inquiry. I will take over my fortune, if you have left me any, and for the sake of my father's name, I will not bring you to justice, even if you have ruined me. But I warn you — and it is the last time, for I am going — if you still try to deny what I know to be the truth, the prosecution shall begin to-morrow. You will not be able to murder me, for I shall be protected, and with all your abominable courage you are not brave enough to try and kill me here, before I leave this room. No — you are not. I am not afraid of you. But you have reason to be afraid. You will be convicted. Nothing can save you. Though people do not know me as they knew my father, — though I am only a girl and came to you, straight from the convent, — I know that I have power, and I shall use it. I am not poor Elettra, whom you intended to accuse. I am the Princess of Acireale; I have been your ward; you and your husband have robbed me, and you have tried to murder me. Though I am only a girl,

justice will move more quickly for me than it would for you, even if you could call it to help you. Now choose, and waste no time."

While she had been speaking, Macomer had stared at her with an expression of genuine childish amusement.

"Poor Pulcinella!" he exclaimed softly. "How your wife can talk, when she is angry! Poor fellow!"

The tone was so natural that Matilde again looked at him uneasily, and moved nearer to him, not answering Veronica.

"Come, Gregorio," she said, "you are ill. Come to your room — you must not stay here."

"I am sorry you do not like the marionettes," he said gravely. "They always amuse me. Stay a little longer."

Veronica supposed that he was ill from the effects of the poisoning and that he was in some sort of delirium. But she did not pity him, and was relentless. She moved nearer to her aunt.

"Answer me!" she said sternly. "This is the last time. If you deny the truth now, I will go to the chief of police at once."

"Oh! poor old Pulcinella!" cried Macomer, laughing gently. "How she gives it to him!"

Matilde was almost distracted.

"You will be arrested at once," said Veronica, pitilessly.

"Never mind, Pulcinella!" exclaimed Macomer. "Courage, my friend! You know you always get away from the policeman! Ha! ha! ha!"

Matilde saw Veronica moving to go to the door. She straightened herself and pointed to her husband.

"Yes," she said. "He did it — and he is mad."

Her voice was firm and clear, for the die was cast. When she had spoken, she turned from them both towards the fireplace, and hid her face in her hands. If he could act his madness out, she, at least, would still be free and alive. Veronica stood still a moment longer, looking back.

"That is the other piece," said Macomer, thoughtfully. "Pulcinella does not go mad in this one. The man has forgotten the parts. It is a pity — it was so amusing."

There was silence for a moment. Matilde did not look round.

"I think he will recover," said Veronica. "But I am glad you have told the truth. I promise that you shall be safe."

In a moment she was gone.

"Just so," said Macomer, speaking to himself. "He forgot the words of the piece, and so he made it end rather abruptly. Let us go home, Matilde, since it is over."

"It is of no use to go on acting insanity before me," answered Matilde, with a bitter sigh, as she

raised her face from her hands and moved away from the fireplace, not looking at him.

"That is the reason why Pulcinella's wife disappeared so suddenly," he replied. "You see, there are two pieces which the marionettes act. In the one which begins with the quarrel — "

"I tell you it is of no use to do that!" cried Matilde, angrily, and beginning to walk up and down the room, still keeping her eyes from the face she hated.

"How nervous you are!" he exclaimed, with irritation. "I was only trying to explain — "

"Oh, I know! I know! Keep this acting for the doctors! You will drive me really mad!"

"The doctors?" He stared at her and smiled childishly. "Oh no!" he exclaimed. "The doctor is in the other piece — I was going to explain — "

She turned with a fierce exclamation upon him and grasped his arm, shaking him savagely, as though to rouse him. To her horror, he burst into tears.

"You hurt!" he whined. "You hurt me! Oh, poor little Gregorio!"

He was really mad, and there was no more acting for him, as the tears streamed down his vacant face, which no longer twitched at all.

His mind had broken down under Veronica's relentless accusation and threat of vengeance.

The miserable woman's strength was all but gone, when she sat down, alone in the room with her mad husband, and once more buried her face in her hands.

He whined and cried a little while to himself, and rubbed his arm where she had taken hold so roughly; but presently his tears dried again, and he leaned over the end of the couch on his elbow, and above her bowed, veiled head he crooked his fingers at each other, and made his hands nod and bob to each other, like little dolls, laughing gently, with a chuckle now and then, at the funny things he heard Pulcinella saying to his wife.

That was the end of the attempt to murder Veronica Serra, and that was the end of the old life at the Palazzo Macomer.

CHAPTER XVI.

Veronica was not only merciful but generous to Matilde, when she finally set her own fortune in order. Through Pietro Ghisleri she found an honest and discreet man of business, whose fortune and good name placed him above suspicion, and who arranged matters to her satisfaction, and as far to her advantage as was possible under the circumstances.

Bosio had possessed a competency, which, as he died intestate, became the inheritance of his brother. But the latter, owing to the time required for the legal formalities, had not been able to get possession of the money before he became insane, and was placed in an asylum at Aversa, where he was probably to remain until he died. Bosio's little fortune remained intact, and the use of it reverted to Matilde Macomer. Veronica paid Gregorio's expenses at the asylum.

As for the Macomer property, she found herself obliged to raise money to meet the mortgages which were due on the first of January after the final catastrophe, since Macomer had used up her income and left her momentarily in difficulties. The banker

who was managing matters for her advanced the sums necessary out of his private fortune, and the estate at Caserta, together with the Palazzo Macomer in Naples, became the property of Veronica Serra. By the estimates made they were worth more than the money raised upon them by mortgage, and by the deeds of sale the balance was to be paid to Matilde. This, with Bosio's property, was enough to make her independent, and, for the time being, Veronica allowed her to live in the house.

Lamberto Squarci was called in constantly, as having been Macomer's agent. By agreement, Veronica caused the accounts of the estate to be balanced from Macomer's books, so that everything appeared to be in order, and she formally took over her fortune from Matilde and Cardinal Campodonico, who knew nothing of the true state of affairs. Since Veronica knew everything and was satisfied, it was not necessary that he should be informed of what had taken place, and this secrecy was the keeping of Veronica's promise that Matilde should be safe.

When all was settled upon a permanent basis, Veronica found herself still exceedingly rich. Matilde was provided for. Gregorio was in the insane asylum. The cardinal and the world at large were in total ignorance of all the truth except the facts which could not be concealed; namely, that Bosio Macomer had killed himself and that his brother was mad. The latter fact explained

the former; for everybody said that there was insanity in the family, and that Bosio had been mad, too.

Veronica's first, chiefest, and most immediate difficulty lay in finding a reason which she could give Bianca and the cardinal for refusing to live any longer with her aunt. She cared very little what society might say, for she was at once too inexperienced to attach the true measure of importance to its opinion, or to understand that the unhappy Princess Corleone was not in a position to socially take the place of a chaperon; and, at the same time, she was too great a personage to be easily intimidated by the fear of gossip. Bianca was her friend, and to her she went unhesitatingly, feeling quite sure that she was doing right.

There were people, however, who thought differently; first among whom were the cardinal and the Duchessa della Spina, Gianluca's mother. The cardinal did not return from Rome until after the first of January, but the duchessa came to see Veronica at Bianca's villa within a few days after Veronica had left her aunt.

The good lady implored her to return to the countess, in the name of society or of religion, but Veronica was not quite sure which she invoked, for her language was not very coherent. She was not more than five-and-forty years of age, but she seemed to be already an old woman. Her hair was

grey, she had lost many teeth, and she dressed, as Veronica wickedly said to Bianca, like the devil's grandmother. She spoke affectionately, as well as reprovingly, however, having known both Veronica's parents, and as having been a third cousin of her mother; and she begged the young girl to come and stay as long as she pleased at the Della Spina palace, as her guest.

Veronica thanked her, but declined to change her quarters. It was clear that the Duchessa wished her to marry Gianluca, and had by no means given up all hopes of the match. It was all the more clear, because she never mentioned him, though Veronica knew that he was no better; and Veronica herself, though sorry for him, asked no questions, lest any inquiry should be taken for a sign of an inclination which she did not feel. The Duchessa smiled reprovingly and shook her head when she went away. It would have been quite impossible for her to explain to Veronica why she should not remain longer than necessary under Bianca's roof. And, indeed, the matter might not have been easy to explain. Veronica was glad when she was gone.

The cardinal was not so easy to deal with. He was a man of singular intensity of opinion, so to speak, when he held any fixed opinion at all, and he was displeased when he learned that Veronica was with his niece. On the other hand, the fact that Bianca was his brother's daughter gave Veron-

ica a weapon against him. Why should she not spend a month or two with the niece of her former guardian, her old friend, the companion of her convent school days in Rome? Would his Eminence tell her why not? His Eminence replied by saying that he had never approved of Bianca's marriage; that Prince Corleone was, in his opinion, as great a good-for-nothing as ever had appeared in Neapolitan society, and was at present known to be leading a dissipated life in Paris and London. Veronica answered that all these things were to the discredit of Corleone, but that Bianca was to be pitied, since she had been so unlucky as to marry a scoundrel, and that, on the whole, it was better that Corleone should stay away from her, if he could not behave decently at home. The cardinal retorted that no young girl should stay two months in the house of any woman who was practically separated from her husband, for whatever reason; and he said that this was an accepted tradition in society, and that society was not to be despised. He was not prepared for the answer he received.

"I am Veronica Serra," said the young girl, with a smile. "Society is society. When we need each other, we will try and agree."

This was somewhat enigmatic, to say the least of it, and the cardinal was not quite sure whether he understood it. He should be very sorry, he said, to think that his old friend's daughter meant to cut

herself off from the world in which she had so important a part to play. Of course, he had no longer any actual authority by which to direct her actions. She was of age, and if she chose to live alone, without so much as an elderly companion, no one could hinder her. To this Veronica promptly answered that she had come to Bianca's house in order not to be alone.

"And why," inquired the cardinal, watching her face keenly, "have you determined that you will no longer live with your aunt Macomer, who is your only near relative and your natural companion?"

This was the real question, and Veronica had hoped that he would not ask it; but being a good diplomatist, and knowing how hard it would be to answer, the wise prelate had kept it back as a hammer with which to drive the wedges he had previously inserted one by one.

"I had understood that you were always the best of friends," he added, while she was silent for a moment.

"We have not agreed so well lately," said Veronica. "Besides, you could hardly expect me to be happy in a house where such horrible things have lately happened."

"You could live somewhere else, and have your aunt with you," suggested the cardinal.

"You do not understand!" Veronica smiled.

"That would be quite impossible. She has always been accustomed to being mistress in the house, and if she lived with me, she would be my guest. She would not like to accept that position. Just imagine! I would not even let her order dinner."

"You might let her do that, by way of a compromise, my child."

"Oh — but she does it abominably! That is one reason for not living with her!"

The cardinal could not help laughing at Veronica's statement of the case.

"I see," he said. "She poisoned you!" And he laughed again.

"Yes," answered Veronica. "That was exactly it. She poisoned us all."

She smiled to herself at the terrible truth of the words which so much amused the cardinal; but she continued to talk in the same strain, giving him the infinity of small reasons, under which a clever woman will hide her chief one, confusing a man's impression of the whole by her superior handling of its parts, exaggerating the one detail and belittling the next, until all proportion and true perspective are lost, and the man leaves her with the sensation of having been delicately taken to pieces, and put together again with his face turned backwards, over his shoulders.

When, on leaving him, Veronica deposited the traditional and perfunctory kiss upon his sapphire

ring, Cardinal Campodonico felt that his late ward had been a match for him at all points, and that after all it was not such a great thing to be a man, if one could not do better than he had done. If he consoled himself with the fact that Eve had outargued Adam, he was mentally confronted by the reflexion that Adam had been a layman, and had not been called upon to sustain the dignity of a cardinal and an archbishop. He determined, however, that he would renew the attempt before long. If Veronica would not leave Bianca's villa, and live in some other way, he would oblige his niece to cut the situation short and go away for a journey.

But Veronica had no intention of quartering herself upon her friend for any great length of time; and perhaps, under the circumstances, she did the best thing she could in going directly to her. Bianca was discreet, and lived very quietly, receiving few people and going very little into the world. The villa itself was at some distance from the centre of Neapolitan life, so that the average idle man or woman thought twice before calling, without a distinct object, and merely for a cup of tea and a cup-of-tea's worth of gossip. There was not that constant coming and going of visitors in every degree of intimacy which might have been expected in the house of a woman of Bianca Corleone's beauty and position. The world is easily tired of unhappy people, and men soon weary of worshipping a god-

dess who never smiles upon them. As for the fact that Pietro Ghisleri was frequently at the villa, society refrained from throwing stones, in consideration of the extreme brittleness of its own glass dwelling. Ghisleri was disliked in Naples, because he was a Tuscan; but Bianca, as a Roman, might have been more popular.

It need hardly be said that she preferred the isolation she enjoyed to a gayer existence. To Veronica it seemed as though she herself had never before known what liberty was. The whole mode of life was different from anything to which she had been accustomed. The villa was near the country, and its own grounds were not small. Bianca was passionately fond of dogs and horses, for her father bred horses on his lands in the Roman Campagna, and she had been accustomed to animals from her childhood. She taught Veronica to ride, and the fearless young girl was a good pupil. They rode out together early in the morning, westward, towards Baiæ, and up to the king's preserves, and often through some lands of Veronica's which lay in the rich Falernian district within an easy distance. A groom followed them. Ghisleri very rarely joined the party.

Bianca Corleone had another accomplishment which was very unusual at that time, and is still uncommon, among Italian women. She could fence, and was fond of the exercise. She had been a deli-

cate child, and it had long been feared that her lungs were weak, so that she had been encouraged from her earliest youth in everything which could contribute towards increasing her strength. Her brother, Gianforte, had even as a boy been a good fencer. He was devotedly attached to his only sister, and as she had not gone to the convent school until she had been fifteen years old, they had been constantly together until then, he being only a couple of years older than she. One day she had taken up one of his foils, laughing at the idea, and had made him show her how to hold it; and he had forthwith amused her by teaching her to fence, on rainy days in Rome, when she could not ride. It had seemed to do her good, and her father had allowed her to have regular lessons, until she could handle a foil very fairly, for a girl. She herself liked it, but she rarely alluded to it, regarding it as a rather unfeminine amusement, and being, at the same time, a most womanly woman.

But in her villa she had a large empty room, admirably adapted for fencing, and three times weekly a famous master came and gave her lessons. To her surprise Veronica had shown an irresistible desire to learn also, and had insisted upon being properly taught by the fencing-master. The young girl had soon shown that she had far more natural ability and aptitude for the skilled exercise than Bianca had possessed when she had first begun.

Her lean young figure, long arms, and unusual quickness gave her every advantage with a foil, and her extraordinary tenacity and determination to do well at it helped her to progress rapidly. Before she had practised two months, though by no means yet as good as Bianca, she had been able to sustain a long bout with her very creditably indeed.

Bianca had a very different temperament and organization. She was never really strong, though exercise had developed her strength to the utmost. She did many things well, but did nothing with that sort of conviction, so to say, which proceeds from conscious inward vigour. When she was not actually riding or fencing, or doing something of the sort, there was a languor in her movements and her manner which told that she had no great vital force upon which to draw. Those who already know something of her story, will remember that her life was short as well as sad.

She watched Veronica with interest, noting how suddenly the girl changed and developed in her new liberty. She had never suspected her of many tastes and inclinations which now showed themselves for the first time. She found that a certain simplicity of view and judgment which she had set down to girlish innocence, was, in reality, the natural bent of Veronica's character. There was a fearless directness in the girl's ways, which delighted Bianca Corleone.

The two young women were alone one afternoon, not long after Veronica had come, when Taquisara and Gianluca appeared together. It was a part of Bianca's way of showing her indifference to the world, to receive any one who came, whenever she was at home. No one should ever be able to say that he or she had not been admitted when Bianca was in the villa.

At the door of the drawing-room, Veronica could see that Gianluca tried to make his friend enter before him, and that Taquisara pushed him forward, with a little friendly laugh of encouragement. It happened that she was seated just opposite to the door. Gianluca came on, and went directly towards Bianca. He was thinner and more transparent than ever. Veronica could almost fancy that she could see the light through his face. She thought he was slightly lame; or, at least, that he walked with a little difficulty.

Bianca looked up kindly, as she gave him her hand, for she had always liked him. Taquisara came to her a moment later, and both men turned to Veronica. Gianluca evidently did not wish to sit down by Veronica, whereas Taquisara, in order to oblige him to do so, took a chair on the other side of Bianca, and spoke to her at once. Gianluca seated himself upon a chair half-way between Bianca and Veronica.

Possibly Bianca resented the Sicilian's cool way

of forcing her to talk with him, as though he knew that she should prefer to do so. For many reasons she was unduly sensitive to the slightest appearance of anything even faintly resembling a liberty. She answered what he said, and made a remark in her turn; but, without waiting for his reply, she looked round at Gianluca and spoke to him, interrupting something which he was trying to say to Veronica. In almost any situation, such a proceeding would have been tactless; but Bianca had seen the result of the meeting between Gianluca and Veronica on the former occasion, and she guessed rightly that if they were forced into the necessity of exchanging commonplaces, there would be an even more complete failure now than there had been before. Taquisara had thrust him upon Veronica in an excess of friendly zeal for his interests. He kept his place for a few moments, and then, seeing Bianca's intention, rose and went to Veronica's other side. Gianluca immediately drew his chair nearer to Bianca.

Veronica did not remember afterwards how the Sicilian opened the conversation, nor what she herself at first said. In spite of the strong impression he had produced upon her when they had met in the garden three or four weeks earlier, she now looked away from him, watching the other two as they talked.

She saw at a glance that Gianluca's manner with

Bianca was not at all what it was with herself. He looked ill and worn; but his face had brightened, his tone was light and cheerful, and he was evidently saying amusing things, for Bianca laughed audibly, which was rare with her, even when she and Veronica were alone together. He was at his ease; instead of seeming awkward he had an especial grace, beyond that of ordinary men; instead of being visibly disturbed by the sound of his own voice, he appeared to be almost as sure of himself and of what he was going to say as Taquisara.

Veronica wondered why she had never noticed him before, except when he was talking with her. He was ill and weak, but he was undeniably a noticeable man. She remembered all that his friend had said of him, and her own disappointment after her last meeting with him, and she all at once realized that she had only seen the man at his worst. She watched him narrowly. He must have felt her eyes upon him, for he turned without apparent reason, and met them. Instantly the blood mounted to the roots of his hair, and he looked away again, and stumbled and hesitated in the answer he gave to what Bianca had last said.

But Veronica remembered very distinctly his speeches to her, and she recalled in contrast the words Bosio had spoken to her just before he died. Then she turned her head, and listened to Taquisara.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I have not the slightest idea," replied the Sicilian, with a little laugh. "I suppose it must have been a compliment, and I did not expect any answer, of course."

"I should have thanked you, if I had heard it," answered Veronica, smiling rather absently, for she was still thinking of Gianluca.

"A man never expects thanks from a woman," said Taquisara. "Shall you stay long with the Princess Corleone?"

"I do not know. I have not decided. Why do you ask?"

"Was I indiscreet?"

"No. Of course not. I thought you might have some reason for asking."

"A general reason, perhaps," answered Taquisara. "You have been in trouble. I suppose that you have been unhappy, and that you will change your life in some way — so I asked what you were going to do."

"As for staying here or not, I have not yet decided. But what I mean to do would not interest you at all. Before very long, I shall probably go to Muro."

"To Muro! I have often wished to see the place where they murdered Queen Joanna."

"I have never been there myself, though it belongs to me," answered Veronica. "Her ghost has it all to itself now. They say that she sits

at the head of the grand staircase, once a year, at midnight, and shrieks. If you wish to see Muro, you had better go before I am there," she added, with a smile. "I shall be there alone, and I could not possibly receive you, as I could not even offer you a cup of tea, you know."

"What an absurd institution society is," observed Taquisara, with contempt. "The priest says, 'Ego conjungo vos'; and you are licensed to snap your fingers at everything that has bound you until that moment, as though the law of your marriage were your divorce from law."

"That sounds clever," said Veronica; "but I do not believe it is."

He laughed, indifferently; and after a moment or two, she looked at him, and smiled.

"I did not mean to be so rude," she said.

So they talked in small, objectless remarks, and questions, and answers, neither witty nor quite witless; but Veronica did not refer to Gianluca, and Taquisara knew that for the present he had better let matters alone. Presently Bianca spoke across to Veronica, and the conversation became general. In the course of it, Gianluca spoke to Veronica, and she answered him, and then asked him a question. She was surprised to find that, so long as the others were joining in whatever was said, he seemed quite at his ease, though his colour came and went frequently. On the whole, she had

a much better impression of him this time than she had retained after the former meeting, when he had seemed so utterly helpless and shy in her presence. But when both men rose to go away she could not help comparing them again.

Even then, it seemed to her that the comparison was less unfavourable to Gianluca than she had expected that it must be. He was tall and well-proportioned, and in spite of the slight difficulty in walking, which she had to-day noticed for the first time, he was graceful and of easy carriage. His extreme languor in moving was, perhaps, what displeased her the most. When he had entered the room, she had been annoyed at his coming; but now she was rather sorry, than otherwise, that he was going away so soon. Possibly, as she had expected nothing, she was the more easily satisfied. Taquisara, too, had disappointed her. He had talked very much like any one else, and not at all as he had talked at that first meeting. Veronica felt that she was indifferent. Bosio's untimely death had terribly changed the face of the world for her, she thought.

A cold listlessness, unfamiliar to her nature, came over her when the two men were gone. Before long Ghisleri appeared, and there was tea and more conversation. He was thought to be an agreeable man, and people said that he talked well. Veronica wondered vaguely what Bianca saw in him that

made her like him so much. But it struck her that the question had not presented itself to her before that day, and that, on the whole, she liked her friend's friend very well.

Presently she left them to themselves in the drawing-room and went to her own room to write a long letter to Don Teodoro, who was now in Muro, and actively engaged in carrying out her wishes for improving the condition of the poor there. As she wrote, her interest in life revived, after having been unaccountably suspended for half an hour, and she felt again all her enthusiasm for the chief object she now had in view.

Soon after this, too, she began to examine the state of the big farms through which she often rode with Bianca, asking questions of the people and entering into conversation with the local under-steward when she chanced to meet him. As was to be expected, the news that the young princess now took an active interest in the administration of her estates soon went abroad amongst the peasants. They soon knew her by sight and were only too ready to come and stand at her stirrup and pour out the tale of their woes, since she was condescending enough to listen. Sometimes, if she found a case of anything like oppression, she interfered. Sometimes, and this was what more often happened, she helped some poor man with money — in order that he might be able to pay his rent to herself. Bianca

laughed once at a charity of this kind, but Veronica held her own.

"The rule is for everybody," she said. "They must pay their rents, or go. If I choose to help those who have had trouble, that is my affair, and not the business of the under-steward with whom they have to do. Besides, if the rent is remitted this year, they will expect the same thing in the future, whereas they know that a little money is a passing charity on which they cannot count with certainty. The less publicity there is about charity, the more of self-respect remains to those who profit by it."

Bianca glanced sideways at Veronica's face as the latter finished speaking, and she felt that the girl was not cast in the same mould as herself.

"I wonder whether you will ever marry," she said thoughtfully, after a short pause.

"Why? What has that to do with it?" asked Veronica.

"Your husband will find that it has a great deal to do with it, my dear," Bianca answered, with a smile, and speculating upon the possible fate of the Princess of Acireale's future husband.

"Oh, — of course, I should not let him interfere in anything of this kind," said Veronica, gravely. "He should not come between me and my people."

She sat very straight on her horse, and the girl's small head and aquiline features had a dominating

expression. A struggling man, with such a look, is a man who means to win, and generally does, whatever the nature of the race may be.

"But I shall never marry," Veronica added presently, and her face softened as she thought of the dead betrothed. "There is plenty to do in the world, without marrying, if one will only do it."

"If you do not, there will be one free man more in the world," answered Bianca.

Veronica laughed a little.

"I daresay I should have my own way," she said.

The longer Veronica stayed with her, the more thoroughly was Bianca convinced of this, and she wondered why it should have taken her so long to discover that the quiet, sallow-faced, gentle-mannered little girl, whom she had first known at the convent school, was developing a character which might some day astonish every one who should attempt to oppose her. It had been a growth of strength, with an accentuation of wilfulness, and it had not been at all apparent at first.

So they lived quietly together, in spite of the Cardinal Campodonico's objections and arguments, and, little by little, Veronica became quite used to her absolute independence of plan and action, and the idea of taking an elderly gentlewoman for a companion grew more and more distasteful to her.

Meanwhile her aunt was living all alone at the

Palazzo Macomer. Many communications passed between the two, about matters of business, during the earlier weeks after their final separation, but they did not meet. As neither of them ever went into the world, it was extremely improbable that they should meet at all, except by agreement.

Gianluca came to the villa again, ten days after the visit last spoken of. And after that he came often, at irregular intervals, generally once or twice a week. The first disappointing impression, which Veronica had retained so long, gradually wore away, and she liked him very much better than she had ever thought possible. Bianca never left the two alone together. She felt more than ever responsible for Veronica, now, and bound to observe the customs and traditions in which both had been brought up. She was wise enough to know, too, that after such an unlucky beginning, it would be better for Gianluca if a long time passed before he had another chance of pouring out his heart to the young girl. Things might go by contraries, she thought. Contempt might turn to familiarity, familiarity to friendship, and friendship to love. The first change had already taken place, and the others might come in time.

Before the spring came, Veronica knew that Taquisara had not been guilty of exaggeration in describing his friend's character. Gianluca was all that his friend had painted him, and perhaps

more. Unfortunately, he was not at all the kind of man whom Veronica would ever be inclined to fancy for a husband. It was easy for her to respect him, as she came to know him better; it would have been hard not to like him, but it seemed impossible to her that she should ever love him.

Taquisara came very rarely — not more than three or four times in the course of the winter. He came alone, and did not stay long. Veronica saw that he avoided her on those few occasions, and preferred to talk with Bianca, though she was sometimes aware that he was looking at her earnestly, when her eyes were half turned from him.

Gianluca seemed to grow a little stronger towards the spring. At least, he was less transparently thin; but the difficulty he had in walking was more apparent than before.

CHAPTER XVII.

As Gianluca's spirits revived, and he began to take courage again and find new hope that Veronica might marry him after all, her position as a permanent guest in Bianca's house became a subject of especial displeasure to the Della Spina family. They wished to renew their proposals for a marriage, and they found themselves stopped by the fact that Veronica was no longer under the charge of any relative to whom they could have communicated their offer.

No one knew exactly what had happened before Christmas at the Palazzo Macomer excepting the persons concerned; but there is inevitably a certain amount of publicity about all business transactions connected with real estate, and somehow a story had filtered from the financial to the social world, which more or less explained Veronica's conduct. It was said that Gregorio, whom most people had detested, had mismanaged her fortune, though nothing was hinted about any great fraud; and people added that when the day of reckoning had come he had found himself ruined, and had lost his mind; Matilde, as guardian, had incurred

the young princess's displeasure, but the latter had treated her generously, allowing her to live in the palace, which was now undoubtedly Veronica's property. Some persons told a story of an attempt made by a servant to poison the Macomer household, but the majority laughed at the tale, and said that Gregorio had been too poor, or too stingy, to have his copper saucepans properly tinned, and that a grain of verdigris would poison half a regiment, as every Italian knows.

However that might be, no one was responsible for Veronica, but Veronica herself, unless Cardinal Campodonico still had some authority over her, which seemed more than doubtful. The old Duca made him a formal visit, and a formal proposition. His Eminence smiled, looked grave, smiled again, and replied that in a long and varied experience of the world he could not remember to have met with just such a case; that so far as he could understand, the young Princess of Acireale was her own mistress, and would make her own choice, if she made any; but that she had been heard to say that she would never marry at all. This, however, the cardinal thought impossible.

"Then," said the Duca della Spina, "you advise me to go directly to the young lady and ask her whether she will marry my son."

"My friend," replied the cardinal, "this is a case in which I would rather not give advice. I have

no doubt that whatever you do will be well done, and I wish you all possible success."

The old Duca shuffled out of the cardinal's study, more puzzled than ever, and went home to tell his wife and Gianluca and Taquisara the result of the interview. Taquisara was in the confidence of the family, and spent much of his time with his friend.

"I am at my wits' end," concluded the old nobleman, shaking his head, and looking sorrowfully at his son. "If you wish it, I will go to Donna Veronica myself. It would be — well — very informal, to say the least. Poor Gianluca! My poor boy! If you would only be satisfied to marry your cousin Vittoria, it would be a question of days! Of course — I understand — her complexion is an obstacle," he added reflectively. "It will probably improve, however."

No one answered him. Taquisara broke the silence, after a pause.

"You must either speak to the Princess Corleone," he said, "or Gianluca must speak to Donna Veronica for himself."

Gianluca said nothing to him, but by a glance he reminded his friend of his former attempt. So they came to no conclusion, though it was clear that Veronica now liked Gianluca quite enough, in their opinion, to marry him at once. But he himself, remembering his discomfiture, knew that the time had not yet come, though he had hopes that it

might not be far off. On that very day he went to Bianca's villa, and stayed an unreasonably long time, in the hope that Ghisleri might appear, for he found Bianca and Veronica alone. Pietro would have talked with Bianca, and he himself would have had a chance, perhaps, to judge of his actual position. He was no longer shy and awkward, now, when he was with the young girl. But Ghisleri did not come, and Gianluca went home, disappointed and disconsolate.

"I suppose that if we were in Sicily," he said to Taquisara on the following morning, "you would propose to carry her off by force. You once advised me to do something of the sort."

"That is a proceeding which needs the consent of the lady," answered the Sicilian. "The 'force' is employed against the relations. Now Donna Veronica has none to speak of so far as I can see. It is a case for persuasion."

Gianluca sighed. Matters were at a deadlock, and Veronica had announced her intention of going to Muro alone, before long. Once established there, she might stay in the mountains until the following autumn, unapproachable in her maiden solitude, as she had told Taquisara. Gianluca might knock at her gate, there, but he would certainly not be admitted.

"You despise me," he said to his friend. "You think me weak and helpless, and you fancy that if

you were in my place you could do better. But I do not believe you could."

"No," replied the other. "I do not believe so, either. And I do not at all despise you. You have only one chance — to make her love you. No man is to be despised because a woman does not love him. It is not his fault."

"I feel as though it were," said Gianluca. "I am sure that if I could change, if I could make myself different in some way — but that is absurd, of course."

"One cannot suddenly become some one else." For himself, without vanity, Taquisara was probably glad of the fact, but he was sincerely sorry for his friend. "You might write to her," he suggested.

"Love-letters — to Donna Veronica?" Gianluca smiled incredulously. "You do not know her!"

"I know her a little," replied Taquisara. "All women like to receive letters from men who love them, if they are well expressed and sincere."

"How horribly practical you are sometimes!" exclaimed the younger man, unaccountably irritated at his friend's generalizations.

Taquisara laughed and knocked the ashes from his long black cigar.

"You came to me for advice, not for sentiment," he observed presently. "Perhaps I am a bad adviser, but that is the worst you can say of me. I daresay I do not understand women. I have

known a few pretty well, but that is all. I am not a lady killer, and I certainly never wished to marry. You must not expect much of me — but what little there is to expect will be practical. Perhaps Ghisleri could advise you better than I. He is a queer fellow. If he ever cuts his throat, he will not die of it — his heart and his head will go on living separately, just as they do now."

Gianluca smiled again, for the description of the man was keen and true, as men knew him.

"No," he answered; "I shall not consult Ghisleri. You and I are different enough to understand each other. He and I are not, though he is a good friend of mine."

"I should not say that you resemble Ghisleri in any way," observed Taquisara, bluntly.

"You may not see it, but I feel it. It is not easy to explain. He and I feel about many things in the same way, but we look at ourselves differently."

"That sounds like a woman's speech!" said Taquisara. "But you are always making fine distinctions which I cannot understand. What do you mean when you say that you look at yourselves differently? How do you look at yourselves?"

"Do you never think about yourself, as though you were another person, and were judging yourself like a man you knew?"

"No," said Taquisara, thoughtfully. "I never thought of doing that."

"But what does self-examination mean, then?" asked Gianluca.

"I have not the slightest idea. I am myself. I know myself. I know what I want and do not want. It seems to me that I know enough. What in the world should I examine? You would be much better if you could get rid of all that romance about conscience and self-examination and such trash. A man knows perfectly well whether he is faithful to the woman he loves or not, whether he is betraying his friend or standing by him — what else do you want? I believe that theology and philosophy and self-examination, and all that, were invented in early times for heathen people who did not know whether they were doing right or wrong, because they were just converted."

At this extraordinary view of church history Gianluca laughed.

"You may laugh," answered the Sicilian. "You will never make me believe that old Tancred sat up all night examining his conscience before he went to the Holy Land — any more than he fasted and prayed before he had his daughter's lover murdered."

"No — perhaps not!" Gianluca laughed again.

"He did what struck him as right and natural," said Taquisara, gravely. "Besides, he was sovereign prince in his own land, and it was not a murder at all, but an execution. For a princess, his

daughter behaved outrageously. I should have done the same thing, in his place. He had the right and the power, and he used it. But that is not the point. As for Ghisleri, he would have cut the boy's head off in a rage, and then he would have spent a year on his knees in a monastery. You would have prayed yourself into a good humour, and the fellow would have got off."

"Unless I had asked your advice," suggested Gianluca.

"And if you had, you would not have acted upon it — any more than you will write to Donna Veronica now, though I tell you that all women like to receive love-letters. It is natural. A woman is not satisfied with being told once a week that she is loved. She likes to know it all the time — the oftener, the better. Two letters of one page are better than one of two pages. Twenty notes a day, of a line or two each, will make a woman perfectly happy — provided that you do not make a mistake and send one less on the day following. They like repetition, provided it is in the same pitch. If you have begun high, you must not let the strings slacken. Women are curious creatures. In religion, they can believe fifty times as much as any man. In love, they only believe while they see you and hear you. As soon as your back is turned — even if they have sent you away — they scream and cry out that you have abandoned them. Before

you come, they want you. When you are there, you weary them. When you are gone, you have betrayed them. And they wonder that a man cannot bear that sort of thing forever! Do you call me practical for speaking in this way? Very well, then — I am practical. I tell you what I know."

Gianluca was amused, but he thought over what Taquisara had advised him to do, and the more he thought about it, the more inclined he was to follow the advice. Not that he regarded the writing of letters to Veronica at all as a hopeful means of moving her; but he felt that he might write her much which he would not say. He loved her with the deepest sincerity, and with an almost morbid passion, and the idea of approaching her in any way was irresistible. He had not realized before now that he could at least try the experiment of writing. She knew that he loved her, and at the worst, she might tell him not to write again. He remembered his terrible awkwardness and hesitation when he had first told her of his love, and his humiliation afterwards, when he had reflected upon the poor figure he had made. There would be no humiliation, now. He was sure of that. He could rely upon his pen and his wits, though he could not trust to his wits with only his tongue to help them.

The chief objection to this method of wooing was that, in his class, it was untraditional. And this

had some weight with him, for he had been brought up rigidly in the practices and customs of an exclusive caste. On the other hand, he had never thought of plunging rashly into love-phrases, from the first. He wished to establish a correspondence with Veronica, and then by subtle tact and delicate degrees to acquire the right of speaking to her, by his letters, of what he felt, making no reference to them when he met her, until she should at last give some sign that she would listen favourably.

The plan was wise and far sighted, but it had not been the result of wisdom nor of diplomatic instinct. He adopted it out of delicacy, and out of respect for the woman he loved, and in the hope of reaching her heart without ever jarring upon her sensibilities.

By nature and talent, as well as by cultivation, Gianluca was admirably gifted for such a correspondence as he now attempted to begin. In other circumstances of fortune he might have become eminent as a man of letters. Without possessing any of that practical, masculine knowledge of women, which Taquisara so roughly expressed, Gianluca had a keen and sure understanding of the feminine mind. There is no contradiction in that, for the men who know something of women's hearts by instinct and experience are by no means always those who are in intellectual sympathy with them. Very young women are sometimes surprised

when they discover this fact, but men generally know it of one another; and the man of whom other men are jealous is rarely the one who prides himself upon knowing and sympathizing with the feminine point of view on things in general, from literature to dress.

Gianluca had talked with Veronica about all sorts of subjects, and she had often asked him questions which he had not been able to answer on the spur of the moment. It was easy for him, in his first letter, to hark back to one of those idle questions of hers, and to make his reply to it an excuse for a letter. Such a communication would need no acknowledgment beyond a spoken word of thanks, which she would bestow upon him the next time they met. It should contain nothing warmer than the assurance of his anxiety to be of service to her, in anything she undertook, and a protestation of respectful friendship at the end.

He wrote that first letter over twice and read it carefully before he sent it. It referred to an historical question connected with the house of Anjou, from which her castle of Muro had come to the Serra by a marriage, several centuries ago, and by which marriage Veronica traced her descent on one side to the kings of France. The castle itself had been twice the scene of royal murders, and there were many strange traditions connected with it. Gianluca got the information he needed from the

library downstairs, and he found ample material for a letter of some length.

But it was not dry and uninteresting, a mere copy of notes taken from histories and chronicles. The man had an undeveloped literary talent, as has been said, and he instinctively found light and graceful expressions for hard facts. He was himself discovering that he had a gift for writing, and the pleasure of the discovery enhanced the delight of writing to the woman he loved. The man of letters who has first found out his own facility in the course of daily writing to a dearly loved woman alone knows the sort of pleasure that Gianluca enjoyed, when he found that it was his pen that helped him, and not he that was driving his pen.

He sent what he had written, and determined that on the following day he would go to the villa again. To his surprise and joy, he received a note from Veronica in the morning, thanking him warmly for the pains he had taken, and asking another question. It came through the post; and with his insight into feminine ways, he guessed that she had not wished to send a messenger to him, — a servant, who would have at once told other servants of the correspondence.

Veronica had been pleased by the letter. She was beginning to like him for himself, and to forget how very foolish he had seemed to be when he was declaring his passion for her. But his letter

showed him all at once in an entirely new light, and was at once a pleasure and a surprise. She thought it natural to write him a few words of thanks. Indeed, it would have seemed rude not to do so.

In the liberty she was enjoying in Bianca's house, she was rapidly forgetting that she was only a young girl, and that society would be shocked if it knew that she was exchanging letters with Gianluca della Spina. There is nothing which a girl learns so easily and all at once as independence of that social kind. What grey-haired man of the world has not at one time or another been amazed at the full-grown assurance of some bride of eighteen or nineteen summers? A month is enough — with proper advantages — to make a drawing-room queen and a society tyrant of a schoolgirl. And that sort of independence is not alone the result of marriage. In Veronica's case, a slowly developed strength had been suddenly set free to act, by an accidental emancipation from all semblance of restraint; and the emancipation was so complete that even in the widest interpretation of the law, no one could have now claimed a right to control or direct her actions.

She was nearly twenty-two years of age; she had a great position in her own right, and she was immensely rich. It was not until long afterwards that she learned how many offers of marriage had

been refused for her by her aunt and uncle. For the present, the fathers and mothers of marriageable sons were waiting until three or four months should have elapsed, for they generally guessed that there had been a catastrophe of some sort at the Palazzo Macomer after Bosio's death; and, moreover, as has been seen, it was impossible to ascertain the proper person to whom to address any such proposal.

The consequence of it all was, that Veronica was absolutely her own mistress, and free to go and come, and to do what seemed right in her own eyes. As she had told the cardinal, when she and society should discover that they needed each other, they would try and agree. In case of a disagreement, it was probable that, of the two, society would yield to Veronica Serra. Meanwhile she would correspond with Gianluca, if she pleased. During the arrangement of her affairs, she had constantly written to men, about business, under the advice of the bankers to whom she had confided the whole matter. Gianluca was merely a few years younger, and happened to belong to her own class. That was all. Why should he and she not write to each other? Yet it was not long since the idea of meeting Gianluca at Bianca's house, by agreement, had seemed a dangerous adventure, about entering upon which she had really hesitated. To-day, for any reasonable cause, she

would have walked through Naples with him in the face of the world, at the hour when every one was in the streets.

He came to the villa in the afternoon, after receiving her note of thanks, and she was glad to see him, and spoke with pleasure of his letter, before Bianca, who seemed surprised, but said nothing at the time. He was wise enough not to stay too long, and he went away exceedingly elated by his first success.

"What is the matter with him?" asked Veronica, of her friend, just after he had left them. "He seems so much better — but he is growing very lame. Did you notice how he walked to-day? He seems to drag his feet after him."

"He must have hurt his foot," said Bianca, calmly. "By the by, what is this, about letters? Do you mean to say that he writes to you?"

"Yes — and I write to him," answered Veronica, with perfect calm. "You see, as I have nobody to ask, I ask nobody. It is more simple."

"But, my dear child — a young girl —"

"Do not call me a child, and do not call me a young girl, Bianca," said Veronica. "I am neither, in the sense of being a thing to be kept under a glass case and fed on rose leaves. I am a woman, and as I do not think that I shall ever marry, I refuse to be chaperoned all the way to old-maidhood. I know that you feel responsible for me, in

a sort of way, because you are married, and I am not. It is really absurd, dear. I am much better able to take care of myself than you are."

"No doubt, in a way. You are more energetic. But as for writing to Gianluca — I hardly know — I wish you would not."

"He writes very well," answered Veronica. "I will show you his letter. Besides, so far as your responsibility goes, it will not last much longer. I shall go to Muro next month."

"Alone?"

"Alone — yes. I always mean to live alone. Don Teodoro will come and dine with me every evening, and we will talk about the people, and what we are doing for them. I shall have horses to ride. If you will come, we will fence together. I shall miss the fencing dreadfully. Could you not come, Bianca dear?"

"I believe that you will miss the fencing more than me, dear," answered Bianca, rather sadly.

Veronica was more to her than she could ever be to Veronica, and she knew it.

"Bianca!" exclaimed the young girl. "How can you say such things! Because I spoke of fencing first? You know that I did not mean it in that way! I want you for yourself — but it will be nice to have the foils in the morning, all the same. You see, I could not even have a fencing-master out there. It is so far! Do come."

Bianca shook her head.

"We will have glorious days together," continued Veronica. "We will do all sorts of things together. They do say that it rains a good deal in those mountains — well, when it rains, you can write to Signor Ghisleri, while I write to Don Gianluca."

Her innocent laughter at the idea startled Bianca, and the beautiful face grew paler, until it was almost wan. Veronica thought she was like a passion flower, just then. A short silence followed.

"Veronica," said Bianca, at last, "why do you not marry Gianluca, since you have grown to liking him so much?"

"I like him for a friend," answered Veronica, quietly. "I do not want a husband. Some day, I will tell you my story, perhaps — some day, if you will come to Muro, dear. Think about it."

She left the room rather abruptly, and Bianca did not refer to the subject again. She had the power, rare in either of two friends, of not asking questions. Confidence given for the asking, however readily, is but the little silver coin of friendship; the gold is confidence unasked.

In the days that followed, Gianluca wrote to Veronica again and again, about all manner of subjects which had come up in their conversation; and Veronica's short notes of thanks grew longer, until she found that she, too, was beginning to write real letters, and looked forward to writing

them, as well as to receiving his. And his came oftener, until she had one almost every day.

But when he came, as he did, twice a week, to the villa, they rarely spoke of their correspondence. Somehow it had come to be a bond linking certain sides of their natures which they did not show to each other when they met and talked. They never could talk as freely as they wrote, even upon the most indifferent subjects, though Gianluca seemed perfectly at his ease in conversation. There was a sort of undefined restraint from time to time, together with the certainty that they would write what they really meant, within a day or two, and understand each other far better than by spoken words.

In Gianluca's case such a condition of things was natural enough. He felt that she understood friendship when he meant love, and he was aware that he was progressing slowly but surely towards the freedom to say what was always in his heart, while his success must depend upon his wisdom and tact in not surprising her with a declaration of passion, in the midst of a discussion upon church history or modern systems of charity. Compared with what he had felt in their former relations, he was happy, now, beyond his utmost expectations; and, in the relative happiness he had found, he was willing to be patient, rather than to risk anything prematurely.

It was more strange, perhaps, that Veronica should regard this growing intimacy as she did, for she had no under-thought of a future change to something else, as he had, and she was naturally simple in reasoning and direct in action. Yet she could not but be aware that there was a sort of duality in their friendship, and she never confused the ideas they exchanged when in the one state — that is to say, when writing — with those about which they talked when an actual meeting brought them into the other. The one state already was an intimacy; the other was hardly yet more than a pleasant acquaintance, with the memory of a disagreeable beginning. Such curiosities of human intercourse are more easily understood by those who have met with them in life than explained to those who have not. The facts were plain. When Veronica and Gianluca were together in Bianca's drawing-room, they said nothing which might not have been heard with indifference by all Naples. When they wrote to each other they spoke of themselves, of their real thoughts about things and people, of their belief, and, to some extent, of their feelings.

Veronica did not perhaps acknowledge that, little by little, Gianluca's letters were beginning to fill the place of poor Bosio's conversation in former times. But that was what was taking place. She was more lonely in mind than in heart, and

without making the slightest pretence to talent or unusual cultivation, she craved a mental companionship of some sort to take up the thread where it had been broken. She had found it unexpectedly in her new friend's letters, and she recognized it and clung to it, as to something almost necessary in her existence. When she was ready to go up to Muro, she knew that without those letters life in such a solitude would be well nigh unsupportable, whereas, being able to look forward to them, and to answering them, her hours of idleness were already a foretasted pleasure.

She had not even told the cardinal that she was going, and she was going alone. In Naples this seemed so incredible that after she was gone, people spontaneously invented a companion for her and assured one another that she had sent for a distant and elderly old-maid cousin as a chaperon and protectress. Even the cardinal believed it, taking it almost for granted.

On the afternoon of the day before her departure Gianluca came, walking with difficulty and excusing himself for bringing his stick with him into the drawing-room. He was very pale, and looked more ill than for a long time past. But he spoke calmly enough, though saying little more than was required, while Bianca and Veronica kept up the conversation. Veronica was in good spirits and was evidently looking forward to the journey with pleasure and curiosity.

Then Ghisleri appeared, followed shortly by Taquisara, who had called very rarely during the winter. Veronica thought that he had grown very cold and silent. He slowly stirred a cup of tea which he did not drink, and he scarcely joined in the conversation at all. He looked occasionally at one or another of the party, and once or twice his eyes fixed themselves on Veronica's face. She could not understand why his presence chilled her, but she was aware that she spoke more coldly than usual to Gianluca.

At the end of half an hour, the latter rose to go, glancing at Veronica as he did so. Taquisara, on pretence of setting down his teacup, rose also and managed to place himself in front of Bianca, and said something to which Ghisleri gave an answer, just as Veronica and Gianluca were standing close together.

"May I go on writing to you?" asked Gianluca, in a low tone and quickly.

Veronica looked up at him with a startled expression.

"Oh please — please!" she answered anxiously. "As often as you can — I count on it! Of course!"

Gianluca's thin, pale face brightened suddenly as he heard her vehement request and the anxiety in her tone.

"Thank you," he said. "Good-bye."

He shook hands with Bianca, nodded to the two

men, and turned away towards the door. He had not reached it, walking a little less painfully in his excitement, when he was aware that he had left his stick leaning against the chair in which he had sat. He stopped and looked back to be sure that it was there, before returning to get it. Veronica was watching him, saw what he had done, picked up the stick and carried it swiftly to him before he could come for it.

Taquisara had seen her movement and had tried to get the stick before she could, to take it to his friend. He had been too far out of reach, and she had been before him. But he followed her, and he saw that as she handed Gianluca his property, she looked up into his face and smiled very kindly. Gianluca thanked her, smiling too, and the impression any one would have had was that they thoroughly understood each other. He bowed again and went out. Veronica turned to come back to the tea-table and found herself facing Taquisara's fiery eyes. She was surprised, and looked into his face, very near to him, and waiting for him to stand aside.

"You are playing with him," he said in a low and angry voice.

The room was long, and Bianca and Ghisleri were at the other end of it. After he had spoken, Veronica stared at him a moment, in genuine amazement at his words and manner. Then her eyes gleamed, too, and the delicate nostrils quivered.

"You are insolent," she said coldly, and turning a little to the right, she passed him.

"No. I am his friend," he answered, scarcely above a whisper, as she went by.

He came back, shook hands with Bianca, bowed coldly to Veronica, and left the room within two minutes after Gianluca.

"What is the matter with Taquisara?" asked Ghisleri, carelessly. "He seems irritable."

Bianca looked at Veronica.

"Does he? I suppose he is anxious about Don Gianluca."

Veronica was still pale when she spoke, but the tone was cold and indifferent.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Veronica had felt herself mortally insulted by Taquisara's manner, much more than by his words, though they had been offensive enough. Her impression of the man was completely changed, in a moment, and she hoped that she might never see him again, so long as she lived. It had been one thing to praise Gianluca to her, and to press his suit for him; it was quite another to lie in wait for her, as it were, at the end of a drawing-room and to reproach her brutally and angrily with wishing to break Gianluca's heart. As she thought of his eyes, and his face, and his low voice, she grew pale with anger herself, at the mere memory of his insolence.

It did not strike her that there could be any truth in his accusation. Gianluca was old enough to take care of himself. Was Taquisara his nurse, his keeper, his doctor? Gianluca was not making love to her in his letters, nor was she, in hers, encouraging him to do so. She was angry at the thought that the Sicilian should know anything of their correspondence, as it seemed evident that he must. It was true that her own friend, Bianca,

knew something about it. She could forgive Gianluca, if he had confided too much in Taquisara, but she could not forgive Taquisara for having been the recipient of the confidence, and she would neither forgive nor forget the way in which he had shown her how much he knew.

For the first time in her life, Veronica longed to be a man, that she might not only resent the insult, but have satisfaction of the man who had insulted her. She felt that she was emphatically not playing with Gianluca, as Taquisara had expressed it. She had told him frankly, several months earlier, that she could not love him,— she had shaken her head and had said that she was sorry,— and neither he nor any one else had a right to suppose that she was now changing her mind. Since Gianluca was apparently willing to accept the position and to be her friend, it was nobody's affair but his and hers. She felt that she had been fully justified in what she had said to Taquisara. At the same time she was half conscious of being disappointed in the man, and of being wounded by the disappointment.

She left Bianca's house early, and as she drove away to the railway station alone with Elettra, she felt that her life was only now really beginning. The months of independence she had enjoyed had prepared her for this final move. In the course of setting her affairs in order, she had been brought face to face with a side of the world which few

women ever see or understand, and her character had hardened singularly to meet the difficulties she had found in her path. She probably overestimated the strength she had now acquired; for more than once, on the way to the station, she felt a momentary reaction of timidity and a longing to go back and stay a few days more with Bianca. She laughed bravely at herself for her weakness, and told herself that she was going to her own place, to be surrounded by her own people, that she was two-and-twenty years of age and had been through troubles during the past months which had proved her strength. Nevertheless, the fact remained that she was a very young, unmarried woman, that she was going to live alone, and that she was breaking through the whole hard shell of fossilized social tradition. Even Elettra, born a peasant of the mountains, thought her mistress's decision amazingly bold, though she approved of it in her heart, and had been ready to go to Muro with Veronica long ago.

"What would your father, blessed soul, have said, Excellency?" she asked, when they were seated together in the train which was to take them to Eboli, beyond Salerno.

"Shall I send for the Countess Macomer?" asked Veronica, with a smile.

"Heaven preserve us from her!" exclaimed Elettra, and she crossed herself hastily, and then

made the sign of the horns with her fingers, against the evil eye, and with her other hand touched a coral charm which she had in her pocket.

Veronica had long been in correspondence with Don Teodoro about the arrangements for her coming. He had expected that she would bring a staff of servants from Naples with all the paraphernalia of a great establishment. She had replied that she intended to employ only her own people, and meant to live very simply. He suggested that she should send a quantity of new furniture, as the apartments in the castle had not been inhabited for nearly twenty years, but Veronica answered that she needed no luxuries, and repeated that she meant to live very simply indeed. She sent her saddle horse and two pairs of strong cobs with two country carriages and a coachman — a very young man, who had served in Gianluca's regiment and had been his man. He was to find a man in Muro to help him in the stables, and he was the only servant, not a native, whom she meant to employ. Don Teodoro had kept ten people at work for a month in cleaning the vast old place. Veronica had sent also a box of books, some linen and silver, and her fencing things — for she still hoped that Bianca would pay her a visit.

The journey by rail occupied between four and five hours, but it did not seem so long to her. She was surprised at the excitement she felt, as she

passed station after station and watched the changing sights and the mountains that loomed up in the foreground, while those behind her dwindled in the distance. She had travelled very little in her life, since she had come back from Rome.

On the platform of the little station at Eboli, Don Teodoro was waiting for her. His tall bent figure and enormous nose made him conspicuous at a distance, and she could see the big silver spectacles anxiously searching for her along the row of carriage windows. As the door was opened for her she waved her handkerchief to the old priest, with a little gesture of happy enthusiasm, high above her head, and he saw her immediately and came forward, three-cornered hat in hand. She suddenly loved the smile with which he greeted her.

"You, at least, do not think that I am mad to come to Muro, do you?" she asked, standing beside him on the platform while Elettra was handing out her smaller belongings.

"Not at all," answered the old man. "You are coming to take care of your own people, and it is a good deed. Good deeds generally seem eccentric to society — and considering their rarity, that is not extraordinary."

He smiled again, and Veronica laughed.

"Your carriage is here," said Don Teodoro. "May I take you to it? Will you give me the tickets, Elettra? They take them at the gate."

Veronica felt a new thrill of joyous freedom and independence, as for the first time in her life she set her little foot upon the step of her own carriage, and glanced at the simple, well-appointed turnout. The coachman sat alone in the middle of the box, a broad-shouldered, clean-shaven young fellow of six-and-twenty, in a dull green livery with white facings — the colours of the Serra.

"You would not even have a footman," observed Don Teodoro.

"No — not I!" she laughed, still standing in the carriage. "How are the horses doing, Giovanni?" she asked of the coachman. "Are they strong enough for the work?"

"They are good horses, Excellency," the man answered. "They need work."

"And how is Sultana?" inquired the young girl, who had not seen the mare for several days.

"The mare is well, Excellency."

Veronica made Don Teodoro sit beside her, and Elettra installed herself opposite them, with her mistress's bags and other things. The luggage was piled on a cart which was to follow, and they drove away.

"I sent the carriage down yesterday," observed Don Teodoro. "I came by the coach this morning."

"Is it so far?" asked Veronica, whose ideas about the position of her property were still uncertain,

for it had never struck Elettra that her mistress did not know how far it was from Eboli to Muro.

"It is over thirty miles," answered the priest, with a smile. "We are beyond civilization in Muro — we are in the province of Basilicata. But there are little towns on the way, and you must stop to rest the horses and to eat something. It will be almost dark when you get home."

"Home!" repeated Veronica, thoughtfully.

A confused vision rose in her mind, of an imaginary room, looking down from a height upon a town below — a room in which she would live altogether, with her books and her favourite objects and the companionship of her favourite ideas and plans, all of which were to be realized and executed in the course of time. She fancied herself gazing down from the wide window upon what was almost all hers, upon the dwellings of people who lived upon her land, who pastured her flocks and drove her cattle, living, moving, and having being as integral animate parts of her great inheritance; children of men and women whose fathers' fathers had laboured in old days that she might have and enjoy the fruits of so much toil, who had given much and from whom had often been taken even that which they had not been bound fairly to give; who had received nothing in return for generations of blood and bone worn out, dried up, and consumed to dust in the service of the great house of Serra. They

had a right to her, as she had a right to the lands on which they lived. There was much talk of rights, Veronica thought, nowadays, and those who had none were privileged to speak the loudest and to be heard first. But those who, having right on their side, were blinded and smitten dumb by the enormous despotism of their self-styled betters — by the glare and noise of blatant power in possession — they were the ones who really had rights, and if she could give any of them a single hundredth part of what was their due, she should be glad that she had lived. Wealth, she thought, should not be an accumulation, but a distribution, of goods. Charity should no longer mean alms, nor should poverty be pauperism. In the young, whole-hearted simplicity of her desire to do good, it seemed likely that she might soon be a specimen of the strangest of all modern anomalies — the princely socialist. It was certainly in her power to try almost any experiment which suggested itself, and on a scale which might ultimately prove something to herself and others.

It was not that she meant to study political economy, or socialism, nor to give the name of an experiment to anything she did. She had been struck by the practical necessity for doing something, when Don Teodoro had first written to her about the condition of the people in Muro, and her own observations made on her farms in the Falernian

district — one of the richest corners of vine land in all Italy — had convinced her that some sort of action was urgently necessary. And if, in the midst of such riches, the Falernian peasants were half starved, what must be the state of the people on her lands in the Basilicata? Don Teodoro had drawn her an accurate picture, full of those plain details which carry more than the weight of their mere words. Something should be done at once. She had given him power and money to help the very poorest, before she came; but her common sense told her that the evil lay too deep in the soil to be reached by a light shower of silver — or even by a storm of gold rain.

Inventors, great or small, are rarely theorists; the invention must be suited to the necessity, before all things, and the theory may come afterwards if anybody cares for it. For a theory is nothing but an attempted explanation, and the fact must exist before it can possibly need explaining. Bread is a great invention against hunger, and a man needs to know nothing about the gastric juices to save himself from starvation when the loaf is in his hand. Veronica meant to put the loaves where they were needed, within reach of those who needed them.

As she was driven through the rugged country on that May afternoon, she felt that she had a future before her, that she was going into action,

and leaving stagnation behind, and that her own life, which was to be her very own, was just beginning. It was to be a life quite different from the existence of any one she knew, for, unlike the lives of her friends, hers was to have an integral, independent existence of its own, with one determined object for all its activity.

The months she had passed in Bianca's house had rather strengthened than weakened the unformulated resolution which she had first vaguely reached in the dark days after Bosio's death. There had been much solitude, and many rides and drives into the country with her beautiful, silent friend; and there had been very little contact with the world to disturb the onward current of her thoughts. More than all, the first breath of liberty after long restraint had enlarged and widened her determination to be always free, in spite of the world, and society, and the drone of the busybodies' gossip. In her heart, the memory of Bosio had grown in dignity, till it was solemn and imposing out of all proportion with what the man himself had been, even as Veronica had known him. To know the truth of what his real life had been would have shaken her own to its foundations. But there was no fear of that; and now, her chief companion was to be the priest who had loved him as a friend. Possibly that last fact had even influenced her a little in her final determination

to live at Muro, rather than in any other of four or five equally habitable or uninhabitable places which she owned, and where she might have begun her work under circumstances quite as favourable to success.

She had thought very little of any need she might feel for relaxation and amusement, and she was very far from realizing what that solitude meant, which she was seeking with so much enthusiasm. She had never yet been as much alone as she should have liked to be, and she could not imagine that she might possibly become tired of playing the princess in the tower for months together, with only the company of one learned old ecclesiastic as her sole diversion. The vision of home which she evoked was always the same, but she did not even know whether the castle had a room which looked down upon the little town. She imagined but a single room; the rest was all a blank. She had been told that it was a great old fortress, with towers and halls and courts, gloomy, grand, and haunted by the ghosts of murdered kings and queens; but the slight descriptions she had heard produced no prevision of the reality as compared with what she really wanted and was sure that she should find.

She thought of Gianluca, as the carriage rolled along through the lower hills, and she looked forward with pleasure to writing about what she saw

and expected to see. It seemed probable that she would write even longer letters to him, now that she was to be quite alone, and she hoped that his would be as interesting as ever. She thought again with anger of Taquisara's extraordinary conduct, for she was positively sure that she was not playing with his friend in any sense of the word. The very suggestion would have been insulting, if he had made it in the most carefully guarded and tactful language. As he had put it, it had been nothing short of outrageous.

Gianluca must be blind indeed, she assured herself, if he fancied that she meant more than friendship by the constant exchange of letters with him. It might be eccentric ; it might be looked upon as utterly and unpardonably unconventional, but it could never be regarded as a flirtation by letter. The proof of that, Veronica argued to herself, was that both of them knew that it was nothing of the sort, a manner of begging the question familiar to those who wish to do as they please without hindrance from within or without.

CHAPTER XIX.

The roads were good, for it was the month of May. In winter, even Veronica's strong horses could hardly have dragged the light carriage to its destination in one day. It was but little after ten o'clock in the morning when Veronica got out upon the platform of the railway station at Eboli; it was sunset, and the full moon was rising, when her carriage stopped at the entrance of the mountain town.

It had been a very long day, and she had seen much that was quite new to her, and different from what she had expected. At first, indeed, she was amazed at the richness of the country beyond Eboli, as she was driven for nearly an hour through what was literally a forest of ancient olive trees, interrupted only here and there by a broad field of vines, cut low and trained upon short stakes; and from the rising ground beyond Carpella, where the road winds up the first hill, she looked back and saw the shimmering grey-green light of the olive leaves, lying like a delicate mantle over the flat country and in the great hollow, from Eboli to the deep gorge wherein the

ancient city of Campania lies as in a nest. A part of the olive land was hers; and as she drove along, the midday breeze blew some of the tiny, star-like olive blossoms into her lap. She took one in her fingers and looked at it closely and could just smell its very faint, aromatic odour.

"It is the first greeting from what is yours," said Don Teodoro, with a smile.

"The wind brings me my own flowers," answered Veronica, and she laughed softly and happily.

Up steep hills and down into deep valleys, across high, arched stone bridges, beneath which the water of the Sele was streaming fast and clear amid white limestone boulders and over broad reaches of white pebbles that were dazzling in the sun — and the olive trees were left behind, and here and there were patches of big timber, oaks to which the old, brown leaves still clung in the spring, and many poplars straight and feathery with leaves but yet half grown. But the land was by degrees less rich and less cultivated, till gradually it changed to a rough and stony country, and even from far off Veronica could see the little flocks of sheep dark brown and white, and small herds of cloud-grey cattle, pasturing and moving slowly on the hillsides above and below the winding road.

She looked at the shepherds when they were near enough for her to see them. As she had left

Eboli, she had seen one, driving a flock of sheep along the high road, and she had wondered whether there were many of his kind. He was a magnificently handsome young fellow of two or three and twenty, dressed in loose brown velveteens, with a belted jacket and a spotless shirt, strong, well-made shoes, leathern gaiters, and a flat cap, and he carried the traditional hatchet of the southern shepherd. He strode along with a light and easy gait, and looked more like a young gentleman in a rather eccentric but well-made shooting-dress, than like a herdsman. But he was from Eboli itself, and a native would have told her that the people of Eboli were "exceedingly fanatic about dress." The men and the clothes she now saw were very different; tall, grim figures in vast and often ragged brown cloaks that reached almost to their feet; small, battered, pointed hats; rough, muddy hose that should have once been white; shoes that loaded their steps like lead; and they moved slowly, with bent heads, rough, long-unshaven faces, eyes too hollow, horny hands too lean — wild, half-fed creatures, worse off than the flocks they drove, by all the degrees of the inverse ratio between man, who needs man's help, and beast, that needs only nature.

There was that same grimness — there is no other word — in the faces of almost all the people Veronica now met, as the road wound higher and

then descended through Oliveto, the first of the mountain villages. There was in them all the look of men and women who know that the struggle is hopeless, but who will not, or cannot, die and be at rest. There was the expression of those who will no longer make any effort except for the bare, hard bread that keeps them above ground, and who, having toiled through the terrible daylight that is their cruel task-master, lie down as they are, when work is done, to forget daylight and life if they can, in a mercifully heavy sleep. But before their bones are half rested, the pitiless day is upon them, and drives them out to labour again till they are stupid with weariness and only not faint enough to faint and forget.

The people sometimes stood still and stared at the young princess as she drove by, with the old priest beside her. But the majority went on, indifferent and far beyond anything like interest or curiosity. Only the shepherds' great cur dogs, of all breeds and colours, but always big and fierce, barked furiously at the carriage and plunged furiously after it, pulling up suddenly and turning back with a growl when they had followed it for half a minute. The women, in ragged black or dark, checked skirts, with torn red woollen shawls hanging from their heads, glanced sidelong at Veronica, when they were still young; but the older ones went by without giving her a

look, their leathern, Sibylline faces set, their old lids wrinkled by everlasting effort till they almost hid the small dark eyes. The most of them carried something in their hands, — faggots, covered baskets, small sacks of potatoes, or corn, or beans; and when the load was heavy they walked with a sharp, jerking turn of the hips to right and left that was almost like a dislocation, and the wrinkles in the faces of these heavy-laden ones were deep folds, as in the hide of a loose-skinned beast. For in that country to be strong is to be cursed; it means double work and double burden, where everything that breathes and moves and can be found to labour is driven to the very breaking point of strain.

But as Veronica drove on, there were fewer men and women in the road, and only once in an hour or so, a huge cart, piled up with wine barrels, lumbered along, drawn by four or five deathly-looking mules that stumbled when they had to stop or start — shadowy creatures, the ghosts of their kind, as it were.

The villages were worse than the open country, for in them the appalling poverty was gathered together in its muddiest colours and set in fixed pictures which Veronica never forgot. In the May weather, the doors of low dwellings were open, and the black and white pigs wandered unhindered from the filthy street without to the

misery within, fattening on the poor waste of the desperately poor, fattening in the sun that drove their wretched betters to the daily fight with starvation, fattening in the vile filth to which starvation was dully indifferent, since cleanliness meant labour that brought no bread.

To the right and left the barren mountains reared their enormous baldness to the sun, deserts raised up broadside, as it were, and set on end, that their bareness might be the better seen and known to the world around. Here and there, from their bases, dark wooded spurs ran out across the rising valley, and the road wound round them, in and out, and up and down, and over stone bridges big and little, and then up in terribly steep ascent, southeastwards to high Laviano, looking towards the pass by which the highway leads from Ciliento to Basilicata.

In Laviano, facing the wretched houses, stood the grand beginning of a wretchedly unfinished building, one of those utter failures of great hopes, which trace the track of invading liberty through the south. It came, it saw, and it began many things — but it did not conquer and it completed very little. In the first wild enthusiasm of the Garibaldian revolution, even poor, hill-perched, filth-stricken, pig-breeding Laviano was to be a city, and forthwith, in the general stye, the walls of a great municipal building, from which lofty

destinies were to be guided and controlled in the path to greatness, began to rise, with strength of stone masonry, and arches of well-hewn basalt, and divisions within for halls and stairways, and many offices. But the beams of the first story were never laid across the lower walls. There was no more money, and what had been built was a palace for the pigs. Laviano had spent its little all, and gone into debt, to be great, and had failed; and though the people had earned some of their own money back as wages in the building, more than half of it slipped into the pockets of architects, who went away smiling, jeering, and happy, to prey upon the next foolish village that would be great and could not. And above, from a hill on the mountain's spur outside the village, still frowned intact the heavy four-towered castle, complete and sound as when it had been built, the lasting monument of those hard warriors of a sterner time, who could not only take, but hold — and they held long and cruelly.

Veronica looked up backwards at the towers, as the horses stood a while to breathe after the steep ascent, and she asked Don Teodoro to whom the castle belonged.

"It is yours," he answered. "The castle is yours, the village is yours, the hills are yours. Your steward lives in the castle. You have much property here, more miles of good and bad land than I can tell."

"And is it all like this? Are the people all like these?"

"No. There are poorer people in the hills."

The happy laugh that had come when the wind had blown the olive blossoms of Eboli upon her lap had long been silent now. Her face was grave and sorrowful, and she drew in her lips as though something hurt her. Some half-naked children stood shyly watching her from a little distance. Pigs grunted and rubbed themselves against the wheels of the carriage, and the coachman lashed backwards at them with his whip. But the cruel day was not yet over, and the people had not come back from their toil, so that the place was almost deserted still. There was an evil smell in the air, and the children's faces were pale and swollen and dirty.

Veronica wondered how any people could be poorer than these, and her face grew still more sad. She tried to speak to the children, but they could not understand her. She got some little coins from her purse, but they were too much frightened to come forward and take them. They were not afraid of the priest, however, and Don Teodoro got out of the carriage and put the money into their horrible little hands, and they ran away with strange small cries and wild, half-noiseless laughter — if laughter can be anything but noisy. Let such words pass as come; for no words of our

tongue can quite tell all Veronica saw and heard on that day. The great Italian myth survives in foreign nations; it has even more life, perhaps, in Italy itself, north of the Roman line; but only those know what Italy is, who have trudged on foot, and ridden by mountain paths, and driven by southern highways, through hill and valley and mountain and plain, from house to house, where there are neither inns nor taverns, throughout that vast region which is the half of the whole country, or more, and where the abomination of desolation reigns supreme in broad day.

That Italy has done what she has done in thirty years, to be a power among nations, is a marvel, a wonder, and almost a miracle. That she should have done it at all, is the greatest mistake ever committed by a civilized nation, and it is irrevocable, as its results are to be fatal and lasting. But upon the good reality of unity, the deadly dream of military greatness descended as a killing blight, and the evil vision of political power has blasted the common sense of a whole people. It is one thing to be one, as a united family, each working for the good of each and all; it is another thing, and a worse thing, to be one as a vast and idle army, sitting down to besiege its own storehouses, each eating something of the whole and doing nothing to increase that whole, till all is gone, and the vision fades in the awakening

from the dream, leaving the bare nakedness of desolation to tell the story of a huge mistake.

Even Veronica's strong horses were well nigh tired out when they reached the dismal solitude of the high pass above Laviano; and she herself was wearied and faint with the gloom, and the poverty, and the barrenness of so much that was hers. But her mouth was set and firm, and she meant that something should be done before many days, which should begin a vast and lasting change. She did not know what she was undertaking, nor how far she might be led in the attempt to do good against great odds of evil on all sides; but she was not discouraged, and she had no intention of drawing back.

It was a very long day. As the hours wore on, the three ate something from time to time, from a basket of provisions which Elettra had brought, and at which Veronica had laughed. But the air of the mountains was keen, and there was not too much in the basket, after all.

Then, in the shadow below the sun-line cut by the mountains across the earth, she saw a sharp peak, grey and regular as a pyramid, rising in the midst of the high valley, and then beyond it, as the carriage rolled along, there was a misty landscape of a far, low valley — and then, all at once, the brown, tiled roofs of her own Muro were at her feet, and far to the left, out of the houses, rose

the round grey keep of the fortress. The setting sun was behind the mountains, and the moon, near to the full, hung, round and white, just above the tower, in the pale eastern sky. From the second turning of the steep descent, Veronica could see a huge bastion of the castle above the roofs, jutting out like an independent round fort.

Many of the people knew that she was coming, and some had hastened from their work to see her as soon as she arrived. Curious, silent, pale, dirty, they thronged about the carriage. An old woman touched Veronica's skirt, and then brought her hand back to her lips and kissed it. Then another did the same — a thin, dark-browed girl with a ragged red shawl on her head. The uncouth men stood shoulder to shoulder, staring with unwinking eyes. A tall, pale shepherd youth was erect and motionless in a tattered hat and a brown cloak, overtopping the others by his head and thin throat, and there was something Sphinx-like in the expression of his still, sad face.

On Veronica's right, as the carriage halted, was the public fountain. Twenty or thirty tall, thin girls in short black frocks, displaying grimy stockings and coarse shoes, or bare legs and muddy red feet, were waiting their turns to fill the long wooden casks they carried on their heads. The fountain had but two little streams of water, and it took a long time to fill a cask. At the sound of the car-

riage wheels, most of the girls turned slowly round to see the sight, their empty barrels balanced crosswise on their heads. They did not even lift a hand to steady their burdens as they changed their positions. They stared steadily. Veronica looked to the right and left and tried to smile, to show that she was pleased. But the visible, jagged edges of their outward misery cut cruelly at her heart, for they were her people; nominally, by old feudal right, they were all her people, and her father's father had held right of justice and of life and death over them all; and in actual fact they were almost all her people, since they lived in her houses, worked on her lands, and ate a portion of her bread, though it was such a very little one as could barely keep them alive.

She tried to smile, and some of the girls held out their fingers towards her and then kissed them, as though they had touched her dress, as the old woman had done. But the men stared stolidly from under the low brims of their battered hats. Only the fever-struck shepherd smiled in a sickly way and lost his Sphinx-like look all at once.

A man in a white shirt came forward, leading Veronica's mare, all saddled for her to mount.

"The carriage cannot go through the streets," said Don Teodoro, in explanation. "They are too narrow and too rough."

"No," answered Veronica, as she stepped from

the carriage upon the muddy stones. "I will walk. If the streets are good enough for my people, they are good enough for me."

Even to the good priest this seemed a little exaggeration on her part. But she had seen much that day of which she had never dreamed, and in her generous heart there was a sort of fierce wrath against so much misery, with a strong impulse to share it or cure it, to face the devil on his own ground, and beat him to death, hand to hand. It was perhaps foolish of her to walk to her own gate, but there was nothing to be ashamed of in the feeling which prompted her to do it.

Don Teodoro walked beside her on the left, and Elettra pressed close to her on the right, as they threaded the foul black lanes towards the castle. The moment she had left the carriage, men and women and children had seized eagerly upon her belongings, to carry the bags and rugs and little packages, and now they followed her in a compact crowd, all talking together in harsh undertones; and from the dark doorways, as she went by, old women and old men came out, and more children, half clothed in rags, and cripples four or five. The pigs that were out in the lanes were caught in the press and struggled desperately to get out of it, upsetting even strong men with their heavy bodies as they charged through the crowd, grunting and squealing. A few people coming from the opposite

direction, too, flattened themselves against the black walls and low, greasy doors, but there was not room even there, and they also were taken up by the throng and driven before, till the small crowd grew to a little multitude of miserable, curious, hungry, scrambling humanity, squeezing along the narrow way to get sight of the lady before she should reach the castle gate.

From time to time the tall old priest turned mildly and protested, trying to get more air and elbow room for Veronica.

"Gently, gently, my children!" he called to them. "You will see your princess often, for she is come to stay with you."

"Eh, uncle priest!" cried a rough young voice. "That is fair and good, but who believes it?"

"Eh, who believes it?" echoed a dozen voices, young and old.

Veronica laid her hand upon Don Teodoro's arm to steady herself as she trod upon the slimy stones. She could not have stopped, for the crowd, extending far behind her in the dim street, would have pushed her down, but she turned her head as she walked and spoke in the direction of the people. Her voice rang high and clear over their heads.

"I have come to live with you," she said, and they heard her even far off. "It is true. You shall see."

"God render it you!" said a woman's voice. "May God make it true!"

"More than one of them are saying that to themselves," observed Don Teodoro, as Veronica looked before her again, and walked on.

Suddenly she came out upon a broader, cleaner way, which led out beyond the houses and up, by a sweep, to the low gate of the castle; close before her was the great lower bastion which she had seen from a distance. She saw now that there was a trellis high up, all over it, on which grew a vine; but the leaves were scarcely budding yet. She had not time to see much, for the crowd would not let her stop, and as the way widened, many ran before her, up to the gate, where they stopped short, for there were half a dozen men there in dark green coats, and silver buttons, foresters of the estate, who kept them back.

Veronica would have turned once more, to nod to the people and smile at the poor women who pressed close upon her, but the crowd was so great that as the foresters made way for her, she found herself driven almost violently into her own gate, and in the rush, Elettra nearly fell to her knees as they got in. The gate clanged behind her, and she heard the great bolts sliding into their sockets, as it was made fast. Her men had known well enough what to expect from the curiosity of the people. They opened a little postern and let in the few who carried her things, and who had been shut out with the crowd.

She drew a long breath and looked upward, before her. It was very unlike what she had expected. She was in the dark, vaulted way, scarcely eight feet broad, and paved with flagstones, which led up to the first small court. The masonry was rough, enormous, damp, and blackened with dampness and age. From the building around the little enclosure small, dark windows looked down upon her. A narrow door was on her right. On the left, rough stone steps led up to the keep, and to the eastern side of the castle. The door stood open, and there was a lamp in the small entry. Before entering, she glanced up at the lintel and saw that the ancient arms of the Serra were roughly sculptured in the old marble, and she knew that she was on the threshold of her home.

It was more like a gloomy dungeon than the princely castle of which she had dreamed. That, indeed, was what it had been through many ages, and nothing else. She wondered where the great staircase could be where the poor ghost of Queen Joanna sat and shrieked at midnight on the twelfth of May. It was near the day, and not being at all timid, she smiled at the thought, as she went in. Three or four decently clad women in black came forward into the vaulted passage, and smiled and nodded awkwardly. They were the people Don Teodoro had engaged for her service. She had a word for each and patted them on the shoulder,

and they led the way, two and two, carrying a light between them, for it was very dark within, though there was still broad daylight without.

Then, all at once, she scarcely knew how, Veronica was standing upon a little balcony. Behind her, the walls of the embrasure were fully fifteen feet thick. Before her, under the glow of the sunset on the one hand, and the first pale moonlight on the other, lay a great valley, deep and long and broadening fan-like from below her to the far distance, where the evening mists were beginning to gather the white light of the moon, while the great mountains of the southeast were still red with the last blood of the dying day — a view of matchless peace and surpassing beauty, such as she had never yet seen. Just then, she looked down, and there, at her feet, were the brown roofs of Muro. Her dream seemed to be suddenly realized, and she had found the room of which she had so often made the picture in her imagination. But it was far more beautiful than she had dared to imagine or dream. The lofty fortress was built lengthwise along the rock, facing the southwest, to meet the winter sun from morning till night; and forever before it lay the wide Basilicata, the peace of the valley, the height of the huge mountains, the infinite tenderness of a distance that is seen from a vast height — in which even what would be near in one plane, is already far by depth.

Veronica looked out in silence for a long time, and the day faded at last in the sky, while the moon's light whitened and strewed blackness across the twilight shadows. The old priest stood beside her, his three-cornered hat in his hand. But the silver spectacles had disappeared. He could feel what was before him without seeing it distinctly.

"I knew that I should find it," said Veronica, at last. "I always knew that it was here. I shall live in this room."

"It is a good room," said Don Teodoro, quietly, and not at all understanding what she meant.

"And I have an idea that I shall die in this room," added the young girl, in a dreamy tone, not caring whether he heard or not. "I am the last of them, you know. They all came from here in the beginning, ever so long ago. It would be natural that the last of them should die here."

"For Heaven's sake, let us not talk of such sad things!" cried the priest, protesting against the mere mention of death, as almost every Italian will.

"Have they made it a sitting-room?" asked Veronica, turning from the balcony into the deep embrasure.

She had scarcely glanced at the furniture, for she had made straight for the window on entering. She looked about her now. There were dark tapestries on the walls. There was a big polished table in the middle, and a dozen or more carved chairs,

covered with faded brocade, were arranged in regular order on the three sides away from the windows. The high vault was roughly painted in fresco, with cherubs and garlands of flowers in the barbarous manner of Italian art fifty years ago. There was a low marble mantelpiece, and on it stood six brass candlesticks at precisely even distances, one from another, the six candles being all lighted. But there was a lamp on the table. Veronica smiled.

"You must forgive me if I have not known what to do," said Don Teodoro, humbly, but smiling also. "I have seen something of civilization in my wanderings, but I never attempted to arrange a house before. This is a very large house, if one calls such a place a house at all."

"I suppose there are thirty or forty rooms?"

"There are three hundred and sixty-five altogether," answered the priest, his smile broadening. "They are all named in the inventory. There is a legend about the place to the effect that there is a three hundred and sixty-sixth, which no one can find. Of course the inventory includes every roofed space between walls, from the dungeon at the top of the keep to the dark room under the trap-door in the last hall on this lower story. But you will be surprised, to-morrow, if you go over the place. It is much bigger than seems possible, because you can never really see it from outside unless you go down into the plain."

"And where do you think that other room is?" asked Veronica, who was young enough to take interest in the mystery.

"Heaven knows! Perhaps it does not exist at all. But as I was saying, my dear princess, I found it hard to arrange an apartment for you, not knowing how you might choose to select your quarters. So I had the tapestries cleaned and hung up, and the chairs dusted and the tables polished, and some lights got ready on this floor, and your bedroom is the last."

"The one with the trap-door?" asked Veronica. "That is very amusing!"

"I had the dark room below well cleaned, and the trap has been screwed down," said Don Teodoro. "I thought that there might be rats there. Elettra has the room before yours. But you are tired, and you must be hungry. It is my fault for not leaving you at once."

"But you will dine with me? To-night and every night, Don Teodoro — that is understood."

Half an hour later, they sat down to table in the light of the lamp and the six candles, in the room from which Veronica had looked out upon the valley. But they were both too tired to talk, though they made faint attempts at conversation, and as soon as the meal was over, the old priest begged leave to go home.

"Do not be afraid," he said, as he bade Veronica

good night. "There are several men in the house. You are not all alone with your five women. The foresters have their headquarters here."

Veronica was anything but timid or nervous, but when she was in bed in her own room at the south corner of the castle, watching the shadows cast up by the flickering night light upon the ancient tapestries, she realized that she was very lonely indeed, she and scarcely a dozen servants, in the vast fortress wherein a thousand men had once found ample room to live. Brave as she was, she glanced once or twice at the corner of the room where the trap-door was placed. There was a carpet over it, and a table stood there which Elettra had arranged hastily for the toilet table. Veronica wondered what end that dark place below had served in ancient days, and whether she were not perhaps lying in the very room in which Queen Joanna had been smothered by the two Hungarian soldiers. It seemed probable.

But she was very tired, and she fell asleep before long, fancying that she was looking out from the balcony again, with the brown roofs of her people's houses at her feet.

CHAPTER XX.

Veronica was awake early in the May morning, and looked out again upon the great valley she had seen at sunset. It was all mist and light, without distinct outline. A fresh breeze blew into her face as she stood at the open window, and the sun was yet on the southeast wall, so that she stood in the clear, bluish shadow which high buildings cast only in the morning.

She had slept soundly without dreams, and she wondered how she could have ever glanced last night towards the place in the corner where the trap-door was hidden under her toilet table, or how she could have felt herself lonely and not quite safe, in her own castle, with a dozen of her own people, when she had never been afraid in the Palazzo Macomer. She pushed back her brown hair, a little impatiently, and laughed as she turned to Elettra.

"We are well here, Excellency," said the maid, with a smile of satisfaction.

She rarely spoke unless Veronica addressed her, and was never a woman of many words.

"And you saw no ghosts?" Veronica laughed.

"I am afraid of ghosts that wear felt slippers," answered Elettra.

An hour later Veronica sent for Don Teodoro, and they went over the castle together. He led her first to the high dungeon on the north side. The natural rock sprang up at that end, and some of the steps were cut in it. At the top, the tower was round, with a high parapet, and an extension on one side, all filled with earth and planted with cabbages and other green things.

"The under-steward had a little vegetable garden here," said Don Teodoro. "I suppose that you will plant flowers. Will you look over the parapet on that side?"

Veronica trod the soft earth daintily and reached the wall. She glanced over it, and then drew a deep breath of surprise. Below her was a sheer fall of a thousand feet, to the bottom of a desolate ravine that ran up to northward in an incredibly steep ascent.

Then they went into the ancient prison, which was a round, vaulted chamber, shaped like the inside of the sharp end of an eggshell, with one small grated window, three times a man's height from the stone floor. The little iron door had huge bolts and locks, and might have been four or five hundred years old. On the stone walls, men who had been imprisoned there had chipped out little crosses, and made initials, and rough dates in the

fruitless attempts to commemorate their obscure suffering.

Veronica and Don Teodoro descended again, and he led her through many strange places, dimly lighted by small windows piercing ten feet of masonry, and through the enormous hall which had been the guard-room or barrack in old days, and had served as a granary since then, and up and down dark stairs, through narrow ways, out upon jutting bastions, down and up, backwards and forwards, as it seemed to her, till she could only guess at the direction in which she was going, by the glimpses of distant mountain and valley as she passed the irregularly placed windows. Several of her people followed her, and one went before with a huge bunch of ancient keys, opening and shutting all manner of big and little doors before her and after her. Now and then one of the men in green coats lighted a lantern and showed her where steep black steps led down into dark cellars, and vaults, and underground places.

She saw it all, but she was glad to get back to the room she already loved best, from which the balcony outside the windows looked down upon the valley.

And there she began at once to install herself, causing her books to be unpacked and arranged, as well as the few objects familiar to her eyes, which she had brought with her. Among these was the

photograph of Bosio Macomer. Those of Gregorio and Matilde had disappeared. She hesitated, as she held the picture in her hand, as to whether she should keep it in her bedroom, or in the sitting-room, in which she meant chiefly to live, and she looked at it with sad eyes. She decided that it should be in the sitting-room. Where everything was hers, she had a right to show what had been all but quite hers at the last. The six brass candlesticks were taken away, and Bosio's photograph was set upon the long, low mantelpiece. His death had after all been more a surprise, a horror, a disappointment, than the wound it might have been if she had really loved him, and it is only the wound that leaves a scar. The momentary shock is presently forgotten when the young nerves are rested and the vision of a great moment fades to the half-tone of the general past. Between her present, too, and the night of Bosio's death, had come the attempt upon her own life, and all the sudden change that had followed the catastrophe. She was too brave to realize, even now, that she might have died at Matilde's hands. She had to go over the facts to make herself believe that she had been almost killed. But the whole affair had brought a revolution into her life, since Bosio had been gone.

Another companionship had taken the place of his, so that she hardly missed him now. She would miss Gianluca's letters far more than Bosio, if they

should suddenly stop, and the mere thought that the correspondence might be broken off gave her a sharp little pain. The idea crossed her mind while she was arranging her writing-table near her favourite window, for all writing seemed to be connected with Gianluca, so that she could not imagine passing more than a day or two without setting down something on paper which he was to read, and to answer. To lose that close intimacy of thought would be to lose much.

But Gianluca had written on the morning of her departure, and before Veronica had half finished what she was doing, one of her women brought her his letter, for the post came in at about midday. It came alone, for Bianca had not written yet, and Veronica's correspondence was not large. She had not even thought of ordering a newspaper to be sent to her. Her work and occupation were to be in Muro, and she cared very little about what might happen anywhere else. She broke the seal and read the letter eagerly.

It was like most of his letters at first, being full of matters about which he had talked with her, and written in the graceful way which was especially his and which had so much charm for her. But towards the end his courage must have failed him a little, for there were sad words and one or two phrases that had in them something touching and tender to which she was not accustomed. He did

not tell her that he was ill and that he feared lest he might never see her again, for he was far too careful as yet of hinting at the truth she would not understand. They were very little things that told her of his sadness — an unfinished sentence ending in a dash, the fall of half a dozen harmonious words that were like a beautiful verse and vaguely reminded her of Leopardi's poetry — small touches here and there which had either never slipped from his pen before, or which she had never noticed.

They pleased her. She would not have been a human woman if she had not been a little glad to be missed for herself, even though the writing was to continue. She read the last part of the letter over three times, the rest only twice, and then she laid it in an empty drawer of her table, rather tenderly, to be the first of many. That should be Gianluca's especial place.

Amidst her first arrangements for her own comfort, she did not forget what she looked upon as her chief work, and before that day was over she had begun what was to be a systematic improvement of Muro. Direct and practical, with a sense beyond her years, she did not hesitate. The first step was to clean the little town and pave the streets. The next to visit and examine the dwellings.

"The place shall be clean," said Veronica to the steward, who stood before her table, receiving her orders.

"But, Excellency, how can it be clean when there are pigs everywhere?" inquired the man, astonished at her audacity.

"There shall be no more pigs in Muro," answered the young princess. "The people shall choose as many trustworthy old men and boys as are necessary to look after the creatures. They shall be kept at night in some barn or old building a mile or two from here, and they shall be fed there, or pastured there. I will pay what it costs."

"Excellency, it is impossible! There will be a revolution!" The steward held up his hands in amazement.

"Very well, then. Let us have a revolution. But do not tell me that what I order is impossible. I will have no impossibilities. The town belongs to me, and it shall be inhabited by human beings, and not by pigs. If you make difficulties, you may go. I can find people to carry out my orders. Begin and clean the streets to-day. Take as many hands as you need and pay them full labourer's wages, but see that they work. Make a list of the pigs and their owners. Decide where you will keep them. Hire the swineherds. If I find one pig in Muro a week from to-day, and if, in fine weather, I cannot walk dry shod where I please, I will take another steward. I intend to remit a quarter of all the rents this year. You may tell the people so. You may go and see about these things at once, but

let me hear no more of impossibilities. Only children say that things are impossible."

The man understood that the old order had departed and that Veronica Serra meant to be obeyed without question, and he never again raised his voice to suggest that there might be what he called a revolution if her orders were carried out.

As for the people of Muro, they were dumb with astonishment. They had a municipality, of course, a syndic, and a secretary, and certain head men, to whose authority they were accustomed to appeal in everything — generally against the extortion of the stewards who had obeyed Gregorio Macomer. But before Veronica had been in Muro ten days, the municipality was nothing more than the shadow of a name. The syndic was her tenant, and bowed down to her, and the rest of the illiterate officials followed his lead. It was natural enough; for they all benefited by the lowering of the rents, and they were quick to see that she meant to spend money in the place, which would be to the advantage of every one before long.

It was she who made the revolution, and not they. Before the first week was out the pigs were gone, and she walked dry shod over the stones from the castle to the entrance of the village. In less than a month the principal way was levelled and half paved, and masons were everywhere at work

repairing those of the houses which were in most immediate need of improvement.

"You are Christians," she said to a little crowd that gathered round her one day, while she was watching the setting-up of a new door. "You shall live like Christians. When you have been clean for a month, you will never wish to be dirty again."

"That is true," answered an old man, shaking his head thoughtfully. "But, in the name of God, who has ever thought of these things? It needed this angel from Paradise."

Veronica laughed. They were docile people, and they soon found out that the young princess was as absolute a despot in character as ever terrorized Rome or ruled the Russias. At the merest suggestion of opposition, the small aquiline nose seemed to quiver, the little head was thrown back, the brown eyes gleamed, the delicate gloved hand either closed upon itself quickly or went out in a gesture of command.

But then, they sometimes saw another look in her face, though not often, and perhaps it was less natural to her though not less true to her nature. They had seen the brown eyes soften wonderfully and the small hands do very tender things, now and then, for poor children and suffering women when no one else was at hand to give aid. Yet, at most times, she was quiet, cheerful, natural, for it hap-

pened more and more rarely that any one opposed her will.

She became to them the very incarnation of power on earth. She would have been thought rich in any country; to their utter wretchedness her wealth was fabulous beyond bounds of fairy tale. Most persons would have admitted that she was wonderfully practical and showed a great deal of common sense in what she did; to her own people she seemed preternaturally wise, only to be compared with Providence for her foresight, and much more occupied with their especial welfare than Providence could be expected to be, considering the extent of the world. She was endlessly charitable to women and children and old men, but to those who could work she was inexorable. She paid well, but she insisted that the work should be done honestly. Some of the younger ones murmured at her hardness when they had tried to deceive her.

"Would you take false money from me?" she asked. "Why should I take false work from you? You have good work to sell, and I have good money to give you for it. I do not cheat you. Do not try to cheat me."

They laughed shamefacedly and worked better the next time, for they were not without common sense, either. Doubtless, she attempted and expected more than was possible at first, but she had Don Teodoro at her elbow, and he was able to direct

her energy, though he could not have moderated it. He found it hard, indeed, to keep pace with her swift advances towards the civilization of Muro, and he was quite incapable of entering into the boldness of some of her generalizations, which, to tell the truth, were youthful enough when she first expressed her ideas to him. But while one of his two great passions was learning, the other was charity, in that simple form which gives all it has to any one who seems to be in trouble — the charity that is universal, and easily imposed upon, and that exists spontaneously and, as it were, for its own sake, in certain warm-hearted people — an indiscriminate love of giving to the poor, the overflow of a heart so full of kindness that it would be kind to a withering flower or a half-dead tree, rather than not expend itself at all. And so, seeing the great things that were done by Veronica in Muro, and secretly giving of his very little where she gave very much, Don Teodoro grew daily to be more and more happy in the satisfaction of his strongest instinct; and little by little he, also, came to look upon his princess as the incarnation of a good power come to illuminate his darkness and to lift his people out of degradation to human estate.

Veronica was happy too. There is a sort of exhilaration and daily surprise in the first use of real power in any degree, and she enjoyed her own sensations to the fullest extent. When she was alone,

she wrote about them to Gianluca, giving him what was almost a daily chronicle of her new life, and waiting anxiously for the answers to her letters which came with almost perfect regularity for some time after her own arrival at Muro.

They pleased her, too, though the note of sadness was more accentuated in them, as time went on and spring ran into summer. He had hoped, perhaps, that she might tire of her solitude and come down to Naples, if only for a few days; or at least, that something might happen to break what promised to be a long separation. He longed for a sight of her, and said so now and then, for letter-writing could not fill up the aching emptiness she had left in his already empty life. He had not her occupations and interests to absorb his days and make each hour seem too short, and, moreover, he loved her, whereas she was not at all in love with him.

Then, a little later, there was a tone of complaint in what he wrote, which suddenly irritated her. He told her that his life was dreary and tiresome, and that the people about him did not understand him. She answered that he should occupy himself, that he should find something to do and do it, and that she herself never had time enough in the day for all she undertook. It was the sort of letter which a very young woman will sometimes write to a man whose existence she does

not understand, a little patronizing in tone and superior with the self-assurance of successful and unfeeling youth. She even pointed out to him that there were several things which he did not know, but which he might learn if he chose, all of which was undoubtedly true, though it was not at all what he wanted. For him, however, the whole letter was redeemed by a chance phrase at the end of it. She carelessly wrote that she wished he were at Muro to see what she had done in a short time. He knew that the words meant nothing, but he lived on them for a time, because she had written them to him. His next letter was more cheerful. He repeated her own words, as though wishing her to see how much he valued them, saying that he wished indeed that he were at Muro, to see what she had accomplished. To some extent, he added, the fulfilment of the wish only depended on herself, for in the following week he was going with his father and mother and all the family to spend a month in a place they had not far from Avellino, and that, as she knew, was not at an impossible distance from Muro. But of course he could not intrude alone upon her solitude.

When she next wrote, Veronica made no reference to this hint of his. The man was not the same person to her as the correspondent, and she very much preferred exchanging letters with him to any conversation. She did not forget what he

had said, however, and when she supposed that the Della Spina family had gone to the country she addressed her letters to him near Avellino. He had not yet gone, however, and he soon wrote from Naples complaining that he had no news from her.

On the following day Veronica was surprised to receive a letter addressed in a hand she did not know. It was from Taquisara, and she frowned a little angrily as she glanced at the signature before reading the contents. It began in the formal Italian manner, — "Most gentle Princess," — and it ended with an equally formal assurance of respectful devotion. But the matter of the letter showed little formality.

"I have hesitated long before writing to you" — it said — "both because I offended you at our last meeting and because I have not been sure, until to-day, about the principal matter of which I have to speak. In the first place, I beg you to forgive me for having spoken to you as I did at the Princess Corleone's house. I am not skilful at saying disagreeable things gracefully. I was in earnest, and I meant what I said, but I am sincerely sorry that I should have said it rudely. I earnestly beg you to pardon the form which my intention took.

"Secondly, I wish very much that I might see you. I fear that you would not receive me, and from the ordinary point of view of society you would be acting quite rightly, since you are really

living alone. The world, however, is quite sure that you have a companion, an elderly gentlewoman who is a distant relation of yours. It will never be persuaded that this good lady does not exist, because it cannot possibly believe that you would have the audacity to live alone in your own house.

"I wish to see you, because my friend Gianluca cannot live much longer. You may remember that he walked with difficulty, and even used a stick, before you left Naples. He can now hardly walk at all. According to the doctors, he has a mortal disease of the spine and cannot live more than two or three months. Perhaps I am telling you this very roughly, but it cannot pain you as much as it does me, and you ought to know it. He is not the man to let any one tell you of his state, and I have taken it upon myself to write to you without asking his opinion. I told you once what you were to him. All that I told you is ten times more true, now. Between you and life, he would not choose, if he could; but he is losing both. As a Christian woman, in commonest kindness, if you can see him before he dies, do so. And you can, if you will. He was to have been moved to the place near Avellino a few days ago, but he was too ill. They all leave next week, unless he should be worse. You are strong and well, and it would not be much for you to make that short journey, considering Gianluca's condition.

"I shall not tell him that I have written to you, and I leave to you to let him know of my writing, or not, as you think fit."

Here followed the little final phrase and the signature. Veronica let the sheet fall upon her table, and gazed long and steadily at the tapestry on the wall opposite her. Her hands clasped each other suddenly and then fell apart loosely and lay idle before her. Her head sank forward a little, but her eyes still held the point on which they were looking.

In the first shock of knowing that Gianluca was to die, she felt as though she had lost a part of him already, and something she dearly valued seemed to go out of her life. Her instinct was not to go to him and see him while she could, but to look forward to the blankness that would be before her when he should be gone. Something of him was an integral part of her life. But there was something of him for which she felt that she hardly cared at all.

She was probably selfish in the common sense of that ill-used word. It is generally applied to persons who do not love those that love them, but are glad of their existence, as it were, for the sake of something they receive and perhaps return — as Veronica did. But she did not ask herself questions, for she had never had the smallest inclination to analysis or introspection. It was as clear

to her as ever that she did not love Gianluca in the least, but that she should find it hard to be happy without him. She had been nearer to loving poor Bosio than Gianluca, though the truth was that she had never loved any one yet.

But she pitied Gianluca with all her heart. That was the most she could do for that part of him which was nothing to her, and her face grew very sad as she thought of what he might be suffering, and of how hard it must be to die so young, with all the world before one. She could not imagine herself as ever dying.

She sat still a long time and tried to think of what she should do. But her thoughts wandered, and presently she found that she was asking herself whether it were her destiny to be fatal to those who loved her. But the mere idea of fatality displeased her as something which could oppose her, and perhaps defy her. After all, Gianluca might not die. She looked over Taquisara's letter again.

He was a man who meant what he said, and he wrote in earnest. There was something in him that appealed to her, as like to like. He had been rude and had spoken almost insolently, and even now he dared to write that he meant what he had said and only regretted the words he had used. For them, indeed, his apology was sufficient — for the rest, she was undecided. She went on to what

referred to Gianluca, and her face grew grave and sad again. It must be true.

She laid the letter in the drawer where she kept Gianluca's, but in a separate corner, by itself. Then she took up her pen to write to Gianluca, intending to take up the daily written conversation at the point where she had last broken off, on the previous evening. With an effort, she wrote a few words, and then stopped short and leaned back in her chair, staring at the tapestry. It was a grim farce to write about her streets and her houses and her charities to a man who was dying — and who loved her. Yet she could not speak of his illness without letting him know that Taquisara had informed her of it. She tried to go on, and stopped again. Poor Gianluca — he was so young! All at once her pity overflowed unexpectedly, and she felt the tears in her eyes and on her cheeks. She brushed them away, and left her letter unfinished.

Half an hour later she was with Don Teodoro, busy about her usual occupations and plans. But she was absent-minded, and matters did not go well. She left him earlier than usual and shut herself up in her own room. She had not been there a quarter of an hour, however, before she felt stifled and oppressed by the close solitude, and she came out again and climbed to the top of the dungeon tower, where the little plot of cabbages

had been converted into a tiny flower garden, and the roses were all in bloom.

With the rising of her pity had come the desire to see Gianluca and talk with him. She could not tell why she wished it so much, after having felt so horribly indifferent at first, but the wish was there, and like all her wishes, now, it must be satisfied without delay. She was supremely powerful in her little mountain town, and on the whole she was using her power very wisely. But her dominant character was rapidly growing despotic, and it irritated her strangely to want anything which she could not have. She had almost forgotten that society had any general claims upon people who chance to belong to it, and the sudden recollection that if she went down to Naples, she could not go and see Gianluca, even under his father's and mother's roof, and talk with him if she pleased, was indescribably offensive to her over-grown sense of independence. Nor could she invite herself to Avellino to pay a visit to Gianluca's mother. She understood enough of the customs of the world with which she had really lived so little, to know that such a thing was impossible.

If she could not see him in Naples and could not go to see him at his father's place, he must come to Muro. It flashed upon her that she had a right to ask the whole Della Spina family to spend a week with her if she chose. They might think

it extraordinary if they pleased — it would be an invitation, after all, and the worst that could happen would be that the old Duchessa might refuse it. But Veronica never anticipated refusals.

As for Gianluca, if he were well enough to be taken to Avellino, he could be brought to Muro. A journey by carriage was no more tiring than one by railway, and the change and excitement would perhaps do him good. The more she thought of the possibility of her plan as compared with the impracticable nature of any other which suggested itself, the more she looked forward with pleasure to seeing him — and the more clearly it seemed to her an act of kindness to give him an opportunity of seeing her.

And between her reflexions, strengthening her intention and hastening her action, there returned the real and deep sorrow she felt at the thought of losing her best friend, and the genuine pity she now felt for him, apart from the selfish consideration which had come first.

In the singular and anomalous position she had created for herself, there was no one whom she could consult. As for asking Don Teodoro's opinion, it never entered her head, for it would have been impossible to do so without confiding to him the nature of her friendship with Gianluca. She would not do that now. She had first told Bianca Corleone frankly enough of the exchange of let-

ters, but she herself had not then known what that secret friendship was to mean in her life, nor how she and Gianluca would almost conceal it from each other. Besides, she was accustomed now to impose her will upon the old priest as she imposed it upon every one in her surroundings. When she asked his advice, it was about matters of expediency, and that happened every day, but she would not have thought of taking counsel with him about any action which concerned herself. If society chanced to be in opposition to her, society must either give way or make the best of it, or break with her. But it was certainly within the bounds of social tradition and custom that she should ask such of her friends as she chose, to stay with her under her own roof.

One small practical difficulty met her, and it was characteristic of her that it was the only one to which she paid any attention after she had made up her mind. She could have found fifty rooms for guests in the castle, but there were certainly not three which were now sufficiently furnished to be habitable as bedrooms. She had changed the face of the town in three months, but she had not at all improved her own establishment. There were foresters and men occupied upon the estates who came and went as their work required, and there were generally four or five of them in the house; but she was served by women, and there was not a

man-servant in the place. She had only five horses in her stable. She glanced at the black frock she wore and smiled, realizing for the first time what Elettra had meant by protesting against her wearing it any longer.

But none of the details were of a nature to check such a woman in anything she really wished. If she chose to be waited on by women and to wear old clothes, that was her affair and concerned no one else. As for a little furniture more or less, she could get all she wanted from Naples in three or four days.

CHAPTER XXI.

Veronica had little doubt but that her invitation would be accepted by the Della Spina. Had she been as worldly wise, as she was practical in most things, she would have had no doubts at all, though she would have hesitated long before writing to the Duchessa. For, of two things, one or the other must happen. Gianluca must either die, or not die; in the first case the least which his family could do would be to give him the opportunity of seeing the woman he loved, before his death, and, in the second, such an invitation on Veronica's part was almost equivalent to consenting to marry him if he recovered. To every one except Veronica herself, the marriage would have seemed in every way as desirable as any that could be proposed to her, both for herself and for Gianluca.

Her invitation was received with mingled astonishment and delight and was duly communicated to Gianluca himself. Veronica had written to him at the same time, and he had already read her letter telling him of her plan, when his father and mother entered the room where he was lying

near his open window, towards evening. They were good people, and simple, according to their lights, and they were devotedly attached to their eldest son. The love of Italians for their children often goes to lengths which would amaze northern people. It may be that where there are few love-matches, as in the old Italian society, the natural ties of blood are stronger than in countries where men leave everything for the women they love.

The Duchessa's chief preoccupation and anxiety concerned her son's strength to bear the journey. From day to day the family had been on the point of moving to Avellino, and the departure had been put off because Gianluca's condition seemed altogether too precarious. It would be an even more serious matter to convey him safely to Muro; and between her extreme anxiety for his health, and her wish that he might be able to go, the Duchessa was almost distracted. But neither she nor her husband knew that the doctors despaired of his life. The truth had been kept from them, and Taquisara had extracted it from one of the physicians with considerable difficulty, having more than half guessed it during the past two months.

At the mere suggestion of going to Muro, Gianluca had revived, reading Veronica's letter alone to himself in his room. When he heard that the invitation had actually come, he seemed suddenly

so much better that the tears started to the old Duca's weak eyes.

"We must go," said the old gentleman to his wife, as they left Gianluca to consult together. "What is the use of denying it? It is passion. If he does not marry that girl, he will die of it."

"Of course she means to marry him," answered the Duchessa, her voice tremulous with nervous delight. "It is not imaginable that she should ask us to visit her, unless she means that she has changed her mind! It would be an outrage — an insult — it would be nothing short of an abominable action — I would strangle her with these hands!"

The prematurely old woman shook her weak fingers in the air, and her passionate love for her son lent her feeble features the momentary dignity of righteous anger.

"I should hardly doubt that she would marry him after this," said the Duca, thoughtfully. "And besides — where could she find a better husband? It is passion that has made him ill."

But it was not. In what they said of Veronica's probable intention they were not altogether wrong, however, from their point of view. They were in complete ignorance of the long-continued correspondence between her and Gianluca, and had they known of it, they could not possibly have understood her way of looking at the matter.

Such a character as hers was altogether beyond their comprehension, and they practically knew nothing of the circumstances that had lately developed it so quickly. As for her mode of life, they believed, as most people did, that she had a companion in the person of an elderly gentlewoman whom she had chosen for the purpose among her distant relations.

Even Taquisara thought substantially as they did, and he was a man singularly regardless of conventions. It was true that he was almost as ignorant of the state of affairs as Gianluca's father and mother. After the first exchange of letters Gianluca had grown suddenly reticent. So long as Veronica had seemed altogether beyond his reach he had not hesitated to confide in the brave and honourable man who was such a devoted friend to him; but as soon as he began to feel himself growing intimate with Veronica, he ceased to speak of her except in general terms. Taquisara, if he had ever felt the need of confidence, would have stopped at the same point, or earlier, and he understood, and did not press Gianluca with questions. The latter had said that from time to time Donna Veronica had been kind enough to write to him — but that was all, and he never said it again. When the Sicilian heard of the invitation to Muro, however, he felt that he had a right to express himself, since the matter was

an open one and concerned the whole family. He felt, too, an immense satisfaction in having produced so great a result by his letter.

He had written to Veronica what the doctor had told him about the general verdict after the last consultation. For himself, his faith in doctors was not by any means blind, and he was not without some hope that Gianluca might recover. At all events, it was his duty to cheer the man as far as he could, and he imagined nothing more likely to produce a good effect than the now reasonable suggestion that Veronica might possibly change her mind.

"Of course," he said to Gianluca, "the whole situation is extraordinary beyond anything I ever knew. But since Donna Veronica has left her aunt, no one can dispute her right to do as she pleases. An invitation to you and your family means a reopening of the question of the marriage. There can be no doubt of that. In my opinion, she has reconsidered the matter and means to accept you, after all."

Gianluca smiled, and his sunken eyes brightened. But he would not admit that he really had any hopes.

"I wish I were as sanguine as you," he answered.

"If you had my temperament, you would not be where you are, my dear friend," replied Taquisara, with a dry laugh. "I look at the world differently.

My life may not be worth much, but it is mine, and I would not let a man take it from me with his hands, nor a woman with her eyes — without fighting for it, if I had the chance."

"How can a man fight against a woman?" laughed Gianluca, for he was very happy.

"You fight a man by facing him, and a woman by turning your back on her," said Taquisara. "There are more women in the world than there are men to love them, after all. For one that will not have you, there are three who will. Take one of the three."

"What do you know about it? You always say that you were never really in love. How can you tell what you would do?"

"I suppose I cannot be quite sure. But then — the thing is ridiculous! A man must be half a poet, he must have sensibilities, ideals, visions, a nervous heart, an exaggerating eye and a mind sensitized like a photographer's plate to receive impressions! Do you see me provided with all that stuff?"

He laughed again, somewhat intentionally, for he meant to amuse Gianluca.

"Nor myself either," answered the latter. "I am much simpler than you imagine."

"Are you? So much the better. But it makes very little difference, since you are to be happy, after all. Seriously, I do not believe that this

invitation can mean anything else. If it does — if she is not in earnest — " he checked himself.

Gianluca looked at him and did not understand his expression.

"What were you going to say?" asked the younger man, with some curiosity.

"Then take one of the other three!" said Taquisara, roughly, and he rose from his seat and walked to the window.

The Duchessa's answer to Veronica was dignified and friendly. After expressing her cordial thanks for the invitation, she went on to say that besides the pleasure it would give her and her son to spend a few days under Veronica's hospitable roof, she was too well acquainted by hearsay with the splendid climate and situation of Muro to refuse an offer, by accepting which she might contribute much to Gianluca's recovery, and she went on to speak of the high mountain air and the sunshine of the Basilicata. There was truth in what she said, of course, and she was too proud not to make the most of it, entirely passing over more personal matters in order to give it the greatest possible prominence. As for Taquisara, though she guessed that he was almost indispensable to Gianluca in Naples, she made no mention of him. It would have been easy for her to suggest that he also might be invited, but she suspected that her son could do without him well enough when privileged

to see Veronica every day; moreover, he would be in the way, and would probably himself fall in love with his young hostess, who, in her turn, might take a sudden fancy to the handsome Sicilian.

It was not until the things which Veronica hastily ordered from Naples arrived in huge carts from Eboli that she began to reflect seriously upon what she had done under a sudden impulse. The Duchessa wrote that she should require four or five days to reach Muro, by easy stages, and there was plenty of time to make preparations for receiving the party. After the letter had come, Veronica spoke to Don Teodoro, who had noticed her extreme preoccupation and was wondering what could have happened.

"I think I understand," he said, looking at her quietly. "It is right — you are young, but the years pass very quickly."

"What do you mean?" asked Veronica, whose sad face still puzzled him.

"What can their coming mean?" he asked, in reply, with a smile.

"What? It is I who do not understand — or you — or both of us. Don Gianluca and I are friends. He is very, very ill. The doctors say that he cannot live many months, and unless I see him now, I shall never see him again."

The old priest gazed at her in distressed sur-

prise, and for a long time he found nothing to say. Veronica remained silent, scarcely conscious of his presence, leaning back in her chair, with folded hands and sorrowful eyes. The thought that Gianluca was to die was becoming more and more unceasingly painful, day by day. The fact that he wrote regularly to her, and yet never spoke of his condition, made it worse; for it proved to her that he could be brave rather than knowingly increase her anxiety, and the suffering of a brave man gets more true sympathy from women than the cruel death of many cowards.

"I think you are very rash," said Don Teodoro, gravely, breaking the silence at last.

Veronica turned upon him instantly, with wide and gleaming eyes, amazed at the slightest sign of opposition, criticism, or advice.

"Rash!" she exclaimed. "Why? Have I not the right to ask whom I please, and will, to stay under my own roof? Who has authority over me, to say that I shall have this one for a friend, or that one, old or young? Am I a free woman, or a schoolgirl, or a puppet doll, to which the world can tie strings to make me dance to its silly music? Rash! What rashness is there in asking my friend and his father and mother here? My dear Don Teodoro, you will be telling me before long that I should take some broken-down old lady for a companion!"

"I have sometimes wondered that you do not send for one of your relations," said the priest, who, mild as he was, could not easily be daunted when he believed himself right.

"I will make my house a refuge, or a hospital if need be, for our poor people," answered Veronica, "but not for my relations, whom I have never seen. I send them money sometimes, but they shall not come here to beg. That would be too much. I had enough of those I knew. I am willing to feed anything that needs food except vultures. I have chosen to live alone, and alone I will live. The world may scream itself mad and crack with horror at my doings, if it is so sensitive. It cannot hurt me, and if I choose to shut my gates, it cannot get in. Besides, they are coming, the Duca, the Duchessa, and Don Gianluca, and that ends the matter."

"Nevertheless —" began Don Teodoro, still obstinately unwilling to retract his word.

"Dear friend," interrupted Veronica, with sudden gentleness, for she was fond of him, "I like you very much. I respect you immensely. I could not do half I am doing without you. But you do not quite understand me. I am sorry that you should think me rash, if the idea of rashness is unpleasant to you — I will make any other concession in reason rather than quarrel with you. But please do not argue with me when I have made up

my mind. I am quite sure that I shall have my own way in the end, and when the end comes, you will be very glad that you could not hinder me, because I am altogether right. Now we understand each other, do we not?"

Don Teodoro could not help smiling in a hopeless sort of way, and he lifted his hands a moment, spreading out the palms as though to express that he cleared his conscience of all possible responsibility. So they parted good friends, without further words.

But when Veronica was alone, she began to realize that Don Teodoro was not so altogether in the wrong as she believed herself to be in the right. People might certainly be found whom she could not class with the world she so frankly despised, and who would say that if Gianluca recovered she should marry him, after extending such an invitation to him and his people, and that, if she did not, she would deserve to be called a heartless flirt — from their point of view. Gianluca's father and mother might say so.

He himself, at least, must know her better than that, she thought. And then, there was the terrible earnestness of Taquisara's letter, the sober statement of his best friend, next to herself, and a statement which it must have cost the man something to make, since it was necessarily accompanied by an apology. After all, though he had insulted

her, she liked Taquisara for the whole-hearted way in which he took Gianluca's part in everything. There was that statement, and she felt that it was a true one. Gianluca was more to her than any one she knew, in a way which no one could understand, and she had a right to see him before he died. If, by any happy chance, he should live, people might perhaps talk. She should not care, for she should have done right. That was the way in which she accounted to herself for her action; but the consciousness that Don Teodoro was not quite wrong was there. She remembered it afterwards, when the fatality that was quietly lying in wait for her raised its head from ambush and stared her in the face. But then, at the first beginning, she was angry with the old priest for trying to oppose her.

There was not more than time to finish the preparations, after all, for she received a note from the Duchessa, written from Eboli, saying that they would arrive a day earlier than they had expected, as the heat in the plain was intense, and they were anxious to get Gianluca to a cooler region of the mountains as soon as possible. Veronica had written, too, placing the castle at Laviano at their disposal, as a resting-place, so as to break the journey more easily for the invalid, and she sent men over to see that all was in order and to take a few necessary things for the guests.

It was a sort of caravan that at last halted before the fountain of Muro, at the entrance to the village. Veronica had been warned of their near approach, and was there to meet them, with Don Teodoro by her side.

First came the Duca and Duchessa together in a huge carriage drawn by four horses, with three servants, two men and a maid. Veronica could not see past the vehicle, as it blocked the way, and she stopped beside it to greet the couple.

"My dear child!" cried the Duchessa. "We shall never forget your kindness, and all the trouble you have taken! Gianluca is in the next carriage. I think you have saved his life!"

There was a sort of inoffensive motherliness in her tone which surprised Veronica — a suggestion of possession that irritated her. But she smiled, said a few words, and ordered the carriage to move on, — an operation which, though difficult in such a narrow way, was possible since she had improved and paved the streets. A couple of her men walked before the horses to clear the way of the women and children and the few men who were not away at work, for the news of the arrival had spread, and the people flocked together to see whether the visitors would bear comparison with their princess.

As the carriage rolled into the street, Veronica went up to meet the next. It was a very long landau, and in it Gianluca was almost lying down,

his pale face and golden beard in strong relief against a dark brown silk cushion. To Veronica's amazement, Taquisara sat beside him, calmly smoking one of those long black cigars which he preferred to all others. He threw it away, when he saw her. She shook hands frankly with Gianluca.

"I am very glad you are here," she said kindly and cheerfully. "You will get well here. How do you do?" she added, turning to Taquisara as naturally as though she had expected him, for she supposed that there must have been some misunderstanding.

He explained his coming in a few words, before Gianluca could finish the sentence he began.

"He hates strangers," he said, "and I came up with him, to be of use on the journey. I am going back at once."

"You will not go back this evening, at all events," answered Veronica, with a little hospitable smile.

She was grateful to him for Gianluca's sake, both for his letter and for having accompanied his friend. For what had gone before, he had apologized and was forgiven.

"I beg your pardon," he answered. "I think I shall be obliged to go back this afternoon."

"Has he any engagement that obliges him to return?" asked Veronica of Gianluca.

As she turned to him, she met his deep blue

eyes, fixed on her face with a strange look, half happy, half hungry, half appealing.

"He has no engagement that I know of," he answered.

"Then you will stay," she said to Taquisara. "Go on!" she added to the coachman, without giving time for any further answer.

There was a note in her short speech which the Sicilian had never heard before then. It was the tone of command — not of the drill-sergeant, but of the conqueror. He almost laughed to himself as the carriage moved slowly on, while Veronica and Don Teodoro followed on foot.

"You must stay, if she wishes it," said Gianluca, in a low voice.

"I am not used to being ordered to quarters in that way," answered Taquisara, smiling in genuine amusement. "I can be of no more use to you when I have got you up to your room, and I think I shall go back as I intended."

"I would not, if I were you. After all, it is a hospitable invitation, and you cannot invent any reasonable excuse for refusing to stay at least one night. The horses are worn out, too. You have no pretext."

"Perhaps not. I will see."

The carriages moved at a foot pace. As Veronica walked along she nodded and spoke to many of the poor people, who drew back into their doors

from the narrow way. Behind her came two more carriages laden with luggage, and one of her own men on horseback closed the procession. By urging his stout beast up all the short cuts, he had accomplished the feat of keeping up with the vehicles.

When they reached the castle gate, the Della Spina's two men-servants jumped down and got a sort of sedan chair from amongst the luggage, but Gianluca would not have it.

"I can walk to-day," he said. "Help me, Taquisara. Have you got my stick? Thank you. No, do not lift me. Let me get out alone! I am sure that I can do it."

Pale as he was, he blushed with annoyance at his feeble state, when he saw Veronica's anxious eyes watching his movements.

It was early yet, but the August sun sank behind the lofty heights to westward, as he set his foot upon the ground. Taquisara's arm was around him, and the Sicilian's face was quiet and unconcerned, but Veronica saw the straining of the brown hand that supported the tall invalid, and she knew that Gianluca could not have stood alone. But he would not let the servants come near him. The old Duca and his wife touched his sleeve and asked him nervous, futile questions, and begged him to allow himself to be carried. Veronica stood in front, ready to lead the way.

"No, no!" exclaimed Gianluca, answering his mother. "You see. I can walk very well to-day, with scarcely any help."

But his first step was unsteady, and the next was slow. Veronica heard the uncertain footfall on the flagstones and turned again.

"Will you take my arm on this side?" she asked gently, placing herself on his right, away from Taquisara.

He hesitated, smiled, and then laid his hand upon her arm, and she and Taquisara led him in together, the old couple following, and looking at each other in silence from time to time. Through the dark, inclined way, they all went up slowly into the courtyard and under the low door, dark even on that summer's afternoon, slowly, stopping at every dozen paces and then moving on again. Taquisara almost carrying his friend with his right arm, while Veronica steadied him on the other side, till they came out at last into a room which had been furnished as a sort of sitting-room and library, especially for Gianluca's use. He sank down into a deep chair facing the window, and drew breath, as he sought Veronica's eyes.

"You are very kind," he said faintly. "But you see how much better I am," he added at once, in a more cheerful tone. "It is the first walk I have taken for several days, Donna Veronica. I have really been ill, you know."

"I know you have," she said, and she turned quickly away, for she felt more than she cared to show just then.

Possibly the Duca and his wife were too much preoccupied about their son's condition to think seriously of what was taking place, but it was strange enough in its way, and Taquisara thought so as he looked on, and wondered what Neapolitan society would think if it could stand, as one man, in his place, and see with his eyes, knowing what he knew. But he had not much time for reflexion. Veronica's women had brought Gianluca wine, and his mother was giving him certain drops of a stimulant in a glass of fragrant old malvoisie, while his father bent over him anxiously, still asking useless questions. Veronica beckoned Taquisara aside, and they stood together behind Gianluca's chair.

"That is his bedroom," she said, pointing to one of the doors, "and that is yours," she added, pointing to one opposite.

"Mine? But you did not expect me —"

"I naturally supposed that he would have a man with him, to take care of him," she answered. "If you are really his friend as you say you are, stay with him. You see that he cannot get about without you. If either of you need anything, ask for it," she added, before he could reply.

"I would rather not stay," said Taquisara, looking gravely into her face.

"Have you a good reason? What is it?" Her features hardened a little.

"I cannot tell you my reason. It concerns myself."

"Then try and forget yourself, for you are needed here," she answered almost sternly.

For two or three seconds they looked into each other's eyes, neither yielding. Then Taquisara gave way.

"I will stay," he said shortly, and he turned his face from her with a sort of effort. "Is there a doctor here?" he asked, looking towards the group of persons who stood around Gianluca.

"Yes — a good one, whom I have lately brought. Shall I send for him? Do you think he is worse?" She asked the question anxiously.

"No. No doctors can do him any good — but if he should be suddenly worse, after the long journey — "

"Do you think it is likely?" asked Veronica, interrupting him in a tone of increasing anxiety.

He turned to her again, and watched her face, curiously, wondering whether she loved the man, after all.

"I hope not," he answered quietly. "But it was a fatiguing drive, and he hardly slept at all last night. I suppose that the excitement kept him awake. He should rest as soon as possible."

"Very well," said Veronica. "I will take his father and mother away and give them tea. Stay with him and make him lie down and sleep, if possible. Dinner is at half-past seven. Let me know if we are to wait for him."

She went to Gianluca's side and spoke to the Duchessa.

"Shall I show you your rooms?" she asked. "Then we can have tea. Don Gianluca must be tired, and he should have quiet and rest before dinner — or if he prefers it, we will not expect him to-night. Sleep first, and decide afterwards," she added, addressing Gianluca himself, and her tone grew suddenly gentle as she spoke to him.

"You are very wise for your age, my dear child!" answered the Duchessa, in the motherly tone that irritated Veronica.

The old gentleman nodded gravely, being quite too much preoccupied and surprised to judge at all of his hostess's wisdom, but delighted with the effect which the change of air seemed already to have produced upon Gianluca.

They went away together, leaving the invalid with Taquisara and his own servant. Veronica led them to her favourite room, then showed them their own, and went back to wait for them, while Elettra brought the tea, just as she had done of old in the Palazzo Macomer. Veronica watched her while she was arranging the tea-table. Elettra,

who rarely spoke unbidden, ventured to make a remark.

"Their Excellencies will be surprised at being waited on by women," she said; for though she hated all men-servants, she had pride for the great old house her fathers had served.

"They will be surprised at so many things that they will not notice it," answered her mistress, thoughtfully.

Elettra glanced at her quickly, but said nothing and went away, leaving her alone. She sat quite still, and did not move until the old couple came back, ten minutes later. She moved chairs forward for them to sit in, and poured out a cup of tea for each. Meanwhile they all three made little idle observations about the weather and the place.

The Duchessa, holding her cup in her hand, looked at the door from time to time, as though expecting some one to come in. At last she could contain her curiosity no longer.

"And where is your companion, my dear?" she asked suddenly.

"In the imagination of society, Duchessa," answered Veronica. "I have none. I live alone."

The Duchessa almost dropped her cup.

"Alone?" she cried, in amazement. "You live alone? In such a place as this!" She could not believe her ears.

"Yes," said Veronica, smiling. "Does it seem

so very terrible to you? I live alone — and I am waited on only by women. I daresay that surprises you, too."

"Alone?" The Duca had got his breath, and sat open-mouthed, holding his tea-cup low between his knees, in both hands. "Alone! At your age! A young girl! But the world — society? What will it think?"

"Unless it thinks as I do, I do not care to know," answered Veronica, indifferently. "Let me give you some bread and butter, Duca."

"Bread and butter? No — no thank you — no — I — I am very much astonished! I am stupefied! It is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of!"

"Of course everybody thinks that you have an elderly companion — " chimed in the Duchessa.

"One of your Spanish relations," said the Duca, with anxious eyes. "Surely, she was here — "

"And is away just now," suggested his wife. "That accounts for — "

"Not at all," said Veronica, almost laughing. "She never existed. I came here alone, I live here alone, and I mean to live here alone as long as I please. The world may say what it pleases. I shall be three-and-twenty years of age on my next birthday. Ask Don Teodoro whether I am not able to take care of myself — and of Muro, too, for that matter!"

"Who is Don Teodoro?" asked the Duchessa, nervously, and still altogether horrified.

"The parish priest," said Veronica. "A very learned and charitable old man. He dines with me every evening."

"Then," replied the Duchessa, with a beginning of relief, "then you, and your good priest, and your woman, make a sort of — of what shall I say — a sort of little religious community here? Is that it?"

"We are not irreligious," Veronica replied, still at the point of laughter. "Most of us hear mass every morning — the church is close by the gate, on the other side of the great tower, you know — and we do not eat meat on fast days —"

"Yes, yes, I understand!" interrupted the Duchessa, grasping at any straw by which she could drag the extraordinary young princess within conceivable distance of what she herself considered socially proper. "And you spend your time in good works, in the village, of course, and in edifying conversation with Don Teodoro. Yes — I see! As you put it at first, it was a little startling, but I understand it better now. You understand it, Pompeo, do you not? It is quite clear, now."

The Duca rejoiced in the baptismal name of Pompey, like many of his class in the south, whereas the name of Cæsar is more common about Rome.

"I have at least done something for the village," said Veronica. "It was in a bad state when I came here."

"It is a very clean village," observed the Duca, whose eyes still had a puzzled look in them, though his jaw had slowly recovered from its fall of amazement. "I saw no pigs in the streets. One generally sees a great many pigs in these mountain towns."

"I turned them out," said Veronica.

She went on to give a little account of the improvements she had introduced, not in vanity, but to keep them from returning to the subject of her living alone. They listened with profound interest, and with almost as much astonishment as they had shown at first.

"But do you find no opposition here?" asked the Duca. "You seem to do just as you please."

"Of course," answered Veronica. "The place belongs to me. Why should I not do as I like? There are a few tolerably well-to-do people here, who own a little property. Everything I do is to their advantage as well as to that of the poor peasants, so that they all side with me. No," she concluded thoughtfully, "I do not think that any one would oppose me in Muro. But if any one should, I have decided what to do!"

"And what should you do?" asked the Duchessa, rather nervously.

"I should send the whole family to America,

with a little money in their pockets. They are always glad to emigrate, and the opposition would be quite out of the way in the Argentine Republic." Veronica laughed quietly.

When the Duca and his wife went to dress for dinner they had some very disturbing ideas concerning the character of the young Princess of Acireale.

CHAPTER XXII.

Taquisara, almost for the first time in his life, did not know how to act, but in accepting Veronica's invitation he felt that he could really be of use to Gianluca, and he saw how unbendingly determined the young princess was that he should stay. He had very good reasons for not staying, but they were of such a nature that he could not explain them to her. He had the power, he thought, to leave Muro at a moment's notice, and in yielding to Veronica's insistence, he was only submitting, as a gentleman should, in small matters, rather than engage in a contest of will with a woman. Yet he knew the matter was neither small nor indifferent, when he gave way to her, and afterwards.

Gianluca appeared at the dinner hour and reached the dining-room with his friend's help. He was placed on Veronica's left, in consideration of being an invalid, though Taquisara should have been there, according to Italian laws of precedence. Veronica had insisted that Don Teodoro should come, at all events on this first evening. She did not choose that the learned old priest should be merely the companion of her loneliness; and besides,

she knew that his presence would probably prevent the Duca and Duchessa from returning to the question of her solitary mode of life. She was also willing to let them see that the humble curate was a man of the world.

It was a day of surprises for the old couple, and their manners were hard put to it to conceal their astonishment at the way in which Veronica dined. They were, indeed, accustomed to a singular simplicity in the country, and to country dishes, as almost all the more old-fashioned Italians are, but in the whole course of their highly and rigidly aristocratic lives they had never been waited on by two women in plain black frocks and white aprons. The Duca, indeed, found some consolation in the delicious mountain trout, the tender lamb, the perfect salad, and the fine old malvoisie, for he liked good things and appreciated them; but the Duchessa's nature was more austerely indifferent to the taste of what she ate, while her love of established law insisted with equal austerity that any food, good or bad, should be brought before her in a certain way, by a certain number of men, arrayed in coats of a certain cut, and shaven till their faces shone like marble. In a measure, it was a slight upon her dignity, she thought, that Veronica should let her be served by waitresses. On the other hand, she reflected upon the conversation which had taken place at tea, and was forced to admit that

she had then discovered the only theory on which she could accept Veronica's anomalous position, and conscientiously remain in the house. Either she must look upon the castle of Muro and its inhabitants as a sort of semi-religious community of women, or else, in her duty to the world, and the station to which she had always belonged, she must raise her voice in protests, loud and many. For many reasons, she did not wish to insist too much, and she did her best to seem indifferent, keeping her arguments before her mind while she ate. The chief of them was, indeed, that she clung desperately to the hope of a marriage; but in her heart there was something else, and she knew that she was afraid of Veronica. It seemed ridiculous, but it was true. And her husband was even more afraid of the dominating young princess than she. They never acknowledged the fact to each other, when they exchanged moralities, and discussed Veronica, but each was afraid, and suspected the other of similar cowardice.

The Duchessa did her best to seem indifferent; but now and then, when one of the women changed her plate, or poured something into her glass, she could not help slowly looking round, with an air of bewilderment, as though expecting to see a man in livery at her elbow.

As for Gianluca, Veronica had described in her letters the way in which she lived; and Taquisara's face more often betrayed amusement than surprise

at what he saw in the world. On the present occasion, having accepted the situation into which his affection for his friend had led him, he had accepted it altogether, and behaved as though he were at a dinner party in Naples, cheerfully making conversation, telling amazing stories of brigandage in Sicily, asking Veronica questions about the surrounding country, and giving such scraps of news about mutual friends as his letters had recently brought him.

Veronica had never seen the man under such circumstances, and she was surprised by his readiness and by his ability to help her in a rather difficult situation. He said nothing which she could compare with what Gianluca wrote. He never spoke of himself, and she did not afterwards remember that he had made any very brilliant observation; and yet, when dinner was over, she wished to hear him talk more, just as she had once longed to hear him say again the things he had said to her for Gianluca's sake in Bianca's garden. She had never met any one who seemed to have such a decided personality, without the slightest apparent desire to assert it. Instinctively, as women know such things, she felt that he was a very manly man, very simple and brave, and vain, if at all, with the sort of vanity which well becomes a soldierly character — the little touch of willing recklessness that easily stirs woman's admiration.

What women hate most, next to cowardice, is, perhaps, the caution of the very experienced brave man — and they hate it all the more because they cannot despise it with any show of reason.

Gianluca was silently happy, perfectly satisfied to hear Veronica's voice, to watch the face he loved, and to feel that between her and him there was something which no one knew. When they spoke, there was a little constraint on both sides; but when they were silent, the bond was instantly renewed. In silence and in imagination, they were writing to each other the impressions of which they would not speak. Gianluca was telling her how grateful he was to her for insisting that Taquisara should stay, after all, and was pointing out to her that his friend was bravely bearing the burden of a conversation which kept his father and mother from prosing about the necessity of a companion for Veronica. Veronica was replying that Taquisara was more agreeable than she had expected, but that if he had been as silent as the Sphinx, or as noisy as Alexander the Coppersmith, she would have pressed him to stay because he was her friend's friend. There was a good deal about Taquisara in their imaginary correspondence.

But both felt a little more constraint, when they talked, than they had ever felt before, for both knew that on the morrow, or on the next day, at the latest, they were sure to be alone together,—

quite alone, — for the first time; and they wondered whether the curious duality of their acquaintance and intimacy by word and by letter could be maintained hereafter, or whether it would suddenly resolve itself into a unity in the shape of a friendship in which they should speak to each other as they wrote.

They knew that something of the sort must happen. The Duca and his wife would certainly not stand sentry from morning till night over the young people, when they themselves so ardently desired the marriage; and Taquisara was not the man to be in the way when he was not wanted. It would be in Veronica's power to put off the meeting, if she chose to do so; but she knew, and Gianluca guessed, that she would not. Whatever society might say about it, she had assumed the position and the independence of a married woman, and had gone further than married women of her age would generally have the courage to go. To hesitate now, and to draw back from the possibility of being left alone with any one of her guests, would be absurd. She would not seek the interview, nor she would not do anything to avoid it. But she did not wish to be forced into the necessity of talking alone with Taquisara, if it could be helped. She was sure, though she had forgiven him, and liked him better than before, that she should certainly quarrel with him, though she did

not know why there should be any further disagreement between them.

Possibly she recognized in him a will less despotic than her own, but quite as unbending when he chose to exercise it. The certainty of strong opposition, which is fear in cowards, becomes combativeness in brave people, and the fighting instinct takes the place of the inclination to run away. But Veronica had no further reason for quarrelling with Taquisara; and because she liked him, she determined to avoid him as much as possible, lest at the very first point of difference in conversation there should be war between them about some insignificant matter perfectly indifferent to both.

Her guests went to bed early. While Gianluca was before her, Veronica had not retained the impression she had received from Taquisara, that her friend was a doomed man. Her own vitality lent the sure certainty of life, in her imagination, to those about her. He was faint and tired from the journey, of course, but he was by no means the utterly helpless invalid she had expected to see, and she had not believed, so long as she could watch him, that he was in mortal danger. But when she was in her own room, his face came back to her, a pale shade out of dark shadow, and she saw the hollows about his deep blue eyes, his thin, bluish temples, his transparent features, and his emaciated throat, that seemed to have fallen away

under his white ears. She was so suddenly and violently disturbed by the recollection that she spoke to Elettra of him. The woman had seen him go by when the party had arrived.

"Do you think that Don Gianluca looks very ill?" Veronica asked.

"Excellency —" the maid hesitated. "I wish that all may live — but he seems a dead man."

Veronica said nothing, but it was long before she got to sleep that night, and the vision of his face came again and again to her, pale, haggard, haunting, distressing her exceedingly. She rose even earlier than usual.

She did not mean that the presence of her guests should interfere with what had now become a connected work, to interrupt which would be an injury to the whole and an injustice to the people who had learned to expect it of her, looking for more, as she gave them more, and turning to her in every difficulty. But for the arrival of the party on the previous afternoon she would have gone down to an outlying farm in the valley, where the farmhouse needed repairs and there was a question of cutting down a number of olive trees so old that they hardly bore any fruit. She had ordered her mare at half-past seven in the morning, and she rode down the long, winding road, saw, judged, and gave orders, galloped most of the way up, and exchanged her riding-habit for her morning frock before the clock struck ten.

One after another, her guests appeared, and everything happened as she had foreseen. The old couple said that they were accustomed to take a little walk before the midday meal, for the sake of their appetite; Taquisara disappeared when he had helped Gianluca to a big chair in a balcony, in the shade, outside the drawing-room, and Gianluca was left alone with her, as she had expected. She established herself opposite to him, for the balcony was so narrow that two chairs could not be placed upon it side by side.

It was a magnificent summer's day, one of those days in which the whole glory of the south fills heaven and earth and air, and the stupendous tide of universal life pours into every sense, to very overflowing, as the ocean fills its world-wide bed. And the world was ripe and ripening, the corn and wheat, and olive and vine, and fruit and flower and tree, from the rich valley below, up the rough hills, as far as sun and soil and rain could draw the dress of beauty over the mountains' grand bare strength. Down there, in the vast garden, the hot air quivered with sheer living; above, the solemn peaks faced God in the still sun. The breath of the high breeze, between earth and heaven, blew upon Veronica's cheek.

They looked at each other and sat silent, and looked again and smiled, both happy in those ever-written, never-spoken thoughts which were theirs

together, both fearing speech as a common thing which must jar and shake them rudely back to their other selves, which were formal, and constrained, and not at all intimate.

Gianluca lay quite still in his deep chair, his white hands motionless upon the edge of the grey shawl which was thrown over his knees. Suddenly, Veronica, sitting close and opposite to him, bent far forward and gently laid her hand upon one of his. She smiled.

"I am glad that you are here," she said simply, looking into his face.

His own brightened, and the blue eyes grew dark and tender, while her hand lingered a second.

"How good you are to me!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "How endlessly good!"

She was still smiling as she withdrew her hand and leaned back in her chair once more. A little pause followed, during which both were quite happy, in different ways — he, perhaps, in all ways at once, and she, because she felt she had broken through something like a sheet of ice by a mere gesture and half a dozen words, when it had seemed so hard to do.

"No," she said thoughtfully, at last. "It is not a question of goodness. I am natural — that is all. I do not believe that many people are. And we had got into an absurd position, you and I!" She laughed, looking at him. "We could write,

but we could not speak. We each knew what the other was thinking of, and yet, somehow, neither of us could say what we thought. Was it not as I say?"

"Yes." Gianluca laughed, too, very faintly because he was weak, though he was so happy.

"It could not last," Veronica continued, "and I am glad it is over. For it is over, is it not? We can talk quite frankly now. Last night, for instance. I am sure I know what you were thinking about."

"About Taquisara? At dinner?"

"Of course. He is so much more agreeable than I expected, and I am so glad that I made him stay. And then, last night, too — did you see how your mother looked at the serving-woman, expecting to see the butler? It was so natural. It was just what I should have done in her place, and I could hardly keep from laughing."

"My dear old mother is not used to such surprises," answered Gianluca. "Of course I saw it, and knew that you did."

"Yes — but do you not think that I am quite right?" asked Veronica, her tone changing suddenly as she seemed to appeal to him for support — she, who needed so little from anybody.

"Of course you are," he answered promptly.

He felt unaccountably flattered and pleased by the mere fact of her asking him the question. He

felt instinctively that she had never asked any one's opinion about her conduct, and that she really desired his approval. She, on her part, was perhaps glad to speak freely at last about the position she had assumed. If he had called her rash just then, she would not have answered him as she had answered Don Teodoro when he had used the same word.

"You see," she said, "I am not like other women. I was brought up in a convent, like most of them, but the rest of my life has been quite different. Well — you know, if any one does. I used to write you all about what I meant to do while I was still living with Bianca, and you know that I have begun to carry out most of my ideas. Yesterday afternoon, while you were resting, your father and mother and I had tea together, and she found out for the first time that I had no companion. You should have seen her face! And then, when I tried to explain, she got the impression at once that I meant to live here in a sort of amateur convent, surrounded by women. I think she rather liked the idea. It seemed to settle her disturbed prejudices a little. Of course — it must seem stranger to people who all live in the same way as she does. Oh! how glad I am that we can talk about it, you and I!"

Again she laughed happily. To Gianluca, as his eyes met hers, it seemed as though a great

wave of the huge, exuberant life that filled the full-blossoming world that day had rolled up out of the broad valley to his feet and were lifting him and penetrating him and sweeping its hot tide through the ebb of his failing blood.

"Yes," he answered her. "To be able to talk at last — at last, after so much waiting, that was only half talking."

He sighed gently, and his hand stroked the grey shawl on his knees, smoothing it first in one way and then backwards in the other. She watched him, and thought that she had never seen a hand so thin.

"We shall never go back to the old way, shall we?" he asked, before she spoke again.

"I hope not!" she answered. "It was so absurd, sometimes. Do you remember at Bianca's house —"

"The night before you left? When I forgot my stick?"

"Yes; but before that. You seemed to think that there was to be no more writing because I was coming here."

Of course — that is, I supposed that it might make a difference —"

"And then you asked me. You should have seen your face! I can remember it now. It changed all at once."

"It is no wonder. You changed the whole

future with one word. You seemed really to want my letters much more than I had imagined that you did."

As by the quick lifting of a dividing veil, all the awkward little incidents and memories of constraint had suddenly become parts of the much larger and more pleasant recollection of their semi-secret intimacy, and in blending with the broader picture the little ones somehow ceased to have anything disagreeable in them, and instead, there was a touch of humour and a suggestion of laughter each time that they compared what they had said and done with what they had written and felt. It was no wonder that the fascination grew on Gianluca with every dancing beat of the happy man's pulse.

They talked on, and in the way she talked Veronica showed that while her character had grown in three-quarters of a year from girlhood to womanhood, and from womanhood to the half-imperial masculinity of a dictatress, her heart was younger than the youngest, was as unsuspicious of itself as a child's, ready to give itself in an innocent generosity which could not conceive that giving might mean being taken, or be as like it as to deceive such a willing, love-sick man as poor Gianluca. She did not say that she loved him, she did not love him, she did not wish him to think that she could love him. Why should he think that

she did? Surely, that he loved her, or thought so, could make no difference.

She was so very young, under her armour of despotism, that she might almost have loved him, as she had all but loved Bosio, had there been anything to love. But there was not. Gianluca was a shadow, an unmaterial being, a thought — anything ethereal, but not a man.

The dream-driven ghost of her dead betrothed was ten times more human and real than Gianluca was to her now, with his white angel's face and misty hands that seemed to hang weightless in the air before him when he moved them. There was more of living humanity in the fast fainting echo of Bosio's last words to her than in Gianluca's clear, sweet tones. If he should tell her that he loved her now, she should perhaps not even blush; for his whole being was sifted and refined and distilled, as the very spirit of star dust, in which there was nothing left of that sweet, earthly living, breathing, dying, loving flesh and blood without which love itself is but a scholar's word, and passion means but a vague, spiritual suffering, in which there is neither hope of joy to come nor memory of any past.

Yet Gianluca breathed, and was a human man, and loved her, and he would have been strangely surprised had he suddenly seen into her heart and understood that she looked upon him as though

he were a being out of another world. The moment when she had first laid her hand upon his had been the supremest of his life yet lived, and all the moments since had been as supremely happy. It was something which he had not dared to hope — to hear her speaking as though there had never been that veil between them, against which he had so often struggled, to feel her warm touch, to see the happy light in her young eyes as she sat there looking at him, to be sure at last, beyond the half assurance of uncertain written words.

But he was wise, and he bridled back the words that most readily of all others would have come to his lips. Perhaps even in the midst of his new happiness, there was the unacknowledged fear of evil chance if he should speak too soon and put the beautiful gold to the touch while the magic transmutation was still so dazzlingly fresh. The present was so immeasurably better than the past, so near a perfection of its own, that he could wait in it a while before he opened wide his arms to take in the very whole of happiness itself, wherewith the beautiful future stood full laden before him.

As they talked, they went over and over much that they had written to each other during the long months of their correspondence, and at last Veronica came back to the question she had at first asked him.

"So you think that I am sensible in living as I

do," she said. "I am glad. I value your opinion, you know."

She had perhaps never said as much as that to any one.

"You have made it what it is," he answered.

"How do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"You cannot do wrong," he replied, with his faint, far-off laugh. "If I had read in a book, of an imaginary person, all that you have written me of yourself, I should have said that most of it was absolutely impossible, or wildly rash, or foolishly unwise. You know how we are all brought up. We are nursed in the arms of tradition, we are fed on ideas of custom — we are taken to walk, as children, by incarnate prejudice for a nursery maid, and taught to see things that used to be, where modern things are. What can you expect? We have not much originality by the time we grow up."

"Yes — you know that I was educated in a convent."

"That is better than being educated at home by a priest." Gianluca smiled again. "Besides, you are different. That is why I say that if I have an opinion, you have made it for me. You are doing all those things which I could not have believed in a book, and they are turning out well. If society could see you here, it would not find it necessary to invent a duenna to chaperon you. But it is not

everybody who could do what you have done, and succeed. I do not wonder that my mother is astonished, and my father, too. But at the same time, since you can do such things, it seems to me that you would have made a great mistake in doing anything else — as great a mistake as Julius Cæsar would have made if he had chosen to remain a fashionable lawyer instead of mixing in politics, or Achilles, if he had taken a necklace or a bracelet and left the sword in Ulysses' basket. You would have found your mythical duenna a nuisance in real life."

Veronica laughed.

"At the end of the first week I should have locked her up in the dungeon tower, to get rid of her," she said.

"I have no doubt that you would, and your people would have thought it the most natural thing in the world. You could do anything you pleased in this place, I fancy. They would not think it strange if you tried and condemned a cheating steward and had him executed in that gloomy courtyard we passed through when we came in yesterday."

"The law might find fault with my vivacity," said Veronica. "But my people would say that I had done right if the man had really cheated them. It is quite true, I think. I could do almost anything here. I had a man locked up in the munici-

pal prison the other day for forty-eight hours, because he was tipsy and swore at Don Teodoro in the street. Of course, it is nominally the syndic who does that sort of thing; but he belongs to me, like everything else here, and I do as I please, just as my grandfather did, when he really had power of life and death in Muro, including the privilege of torture. The first article mentioned in the old inventory was forty palms of stout rope for giving the cord, as they called it. They did it under the main gate, — that is why it came first, — and they used to pull them up to the vault and then drop them with a jerk to within two feet of the ground. The ring is still there, just inside the gate."

"My mother's uncle — the old Marchese di Rionero — once hanged a ruffian for mutilating one of his horses out of spite. And they say that Italy has not progressed! There is no hanging, not even for murder, nowadays."

"Yes," answered Veronica, thoughtfully, "we have progressed, in a way. That is our trouble — we have progressed too fast and improved too little, I think."

"That sounds paradoxical."

"Oh no! It is common sense, as I mean it. Progress costs money, improvement brings it. Progress means wearing clothes like other people, having splendid cities like other nations, keeping

up armies and navies like other great powers. Improvement means helping poor people to earn more wages and to live better — giving them a possibility of happiness, instead of taking the little they have in order to give ourselves the appearance of greatness. That is why I say that in Italy we have too much progress and too little improvement."

"Yes — how well you put it!" Gianluca looked at her with quick admiration.

"Do I? It is because you understand easily. Should you call me patriotic? I think I am. I am an Italian before anything else, before being a Serra, a woman, a member of society — anything! I feel as though I should like to give my heart for my people and my life for our country, if it would do any good. Of course, if it really came to making any great sacrifice, I suppose my courage would shrivel up and I should behave just like any one else."

"No — you would not," said Gianluca, gravely. "There have been women — the great Countess, and Saint Catherine of Siena —"

"Yes!" Veronica laughed. "And there were also my good ancestors, who tore Italy to pieces, joined hands with German Emperors, upset Popes, seized everything they could lay hands upon, and turned the country into a sort of perpetual gladiator's show. That is a proud and promising inheritance

for an aspiring patriot, is it not? The less you and I talk of patriotism, the better — seeing what our people have done in history to make patriotism necessary in our time."

"Perhaps so. Doing is better than talking, and you have begun by doing good and trying to make people happy. You have succeeded in one case, already."

She looked at him with a glance of inquiry.

"What case?" she asked.

"I mean myself — of course. You have made me perfectly happy to-day."

"I am glad," she answered. "I wish you to be always happy."

She spoke thoughtfully, gravely, and gently, and then turned from him a little, and looked through the iron railing of the balcony, down at the deep distance of the valley. She was wondering, and justly, whether during the past hour she had not made a mistake, very cruel to him, in breaking down all at once the barrier of excessive formality which hitherto had stood between them when they met. Words rose to her lips, which with the utmost gentleness should quickly undeceive him, if he had been deceived; but when she looked at him and saw his happy, appealing eyes and his transparent face, her courage was not ready. Perhaps he was dying, as she had been told. She turned again and watched the misty depths.

"Don Gianluca—" she began, with a little hesitation. But as she spoke there was a footfall in the embrasure.

"What were you going to say?" asked Gianluca, knowing from her tone that she had meant to speak of some grave matter.

"Nothing!" she answered with a little sharpness. "Pray take my chair, Duchessa," she said, turning to the good lady, who had come slowly forward till she stood with her head just out in the air. "It is time for luncheon," she added, as she made the Duchessa sit down, nodded quickly to Gianluca, and went in.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The regularity of the existence at Muro pleased the old couple, and contributed in a measure to allay their perpetual anxiety about their son and to calm their uneasiness about the whole situation. They were both too wise and too courteous to press the question of marriage upon Veronica under the present circumstances, but they did not feel that they were led too far by their affection for Gianluca when they told each other, in the privacy of the Duchessa's dressing-room, that after what Veronica had now done she was bound, in common self-respect, to marry him. That he would recover from his illness, they never doubted; for, as has been said, the truth had been kept from them, in so far as the prognostications of doctors could be looked upon as worthy of belief. He had certainly been much better since they had brought him to Muro, and they secretly wished that they might all stay where they were until the autumn.

On that first day, Veronica had been on the point of speaking very plainly to Gianluca, intending to tell him once again that he must not be deceived, that she should never marry him, and indeed had no

intention of ever marrying at all. But she had been interrupted by the coming of the Duchessa; and, as she had not spoken at the first opportunity, she did not purposely create another at once. She was not skilful in such situations. When her directness came into conflict with her sense of delicacy, one or the other gave way; for in serious matters she instinctively hated complicated methods, and though she could be hard and perhaps unnecessarily cruel, yet she would at any time rather be overkind than take refuge in the compromises of what most people call tact. The weaknesses of the strong are like the crevasses in a glacier; they have a general direction, but it is impossible to know certainly beforehand the precise depth or importance of any one of them, nor how far it may lead. The little strengths of weak people are like jagged rocks jutting up in shifting sands and changing tide, the more dangerous to the unwary because they are few and unexpected, and no one can tell where they lie, just below the surface. Many a brave enterprise has gone to pieces upon the stupid, unforeseen obstinacy of a despised weakling.

Veronica, like other people, even the very strongest, had weak points, or moments when some points of her character were weak, which comes to the same thing in result. She dreaded to hurt Gianluca, and since the occasion had passed when she might have made everything clear, and would

have done so, she found it hard to decide how to act.

Taquisara had told her that the man was dying. If that were true, it could make no difference, whether he believed that she would marry him or not. The thought of his death was terribly painful, and she thrust it from her; for she was not heartless, and in the days that followed their conversation on the balcony, her affection grew to be as real and deep as it could possibly have been for a most dearly loved brother. For her, there had been none of those ties in which such affections live and grow and become parts of life itself. Fatherless, motherless, without brother, or sisters, the girl had grown up not knowing what she had to give, and giving scarcely anything at all of what was best in her. She was reticent and proud, and could never be attached to many people. Bianca had been her friend, in a way, but Bianca's life was mysterious to her, and Pietro Ghisleri had come between the two.

And now, through many months, by the intimacy of correspondence which had suddenly turned to an intimacy of real converse in which she had not been disappointed, she had grown — for it was a true growth — to the power of a most devoted friendship, capable of great and lasting sacrifice. It was a friendship, too, that was, as it were, presanctified by the rising shadow of near death, fore-

hallowed by the sure suffering of its coming end. It would be hard indeed to cut from Gianluca's heart the one flower of his loving belief.

But then, when she sat beside him on the balcony in the shady hours, and the great wave of life came up to her from the southern valley, she could not believe that he was really to die. And then, she hesitated, and she wished to do what was right and true by him, pain or no pain. Sometimes there was a little colour in his face, and often the deep blue light came into his beautiful eyes. He was to live, then, and she felt that she was cruel, and base, and cowardly to let his thoughts of her grow.

Those were the good days. There were worse ones, when he lay like a dead angel before her, and only in his eyes there was a little life. Then more than once, she gave him the magic of her touch, laid one hand softly upon one of his, or smoothed his silk pillow and arranged the shawl about him. Perhaps she was wrong to do such things, just because she was so young; but when she did them he breathed freely again, and the faint false dawn of a new day that might never brighten rose in the alabaster cheeks.

Once, Taquisara, standing on the great round bastion below, unnoticed by them both under the spreading vine, turned suddenly by chance and looked up through the leaves, and he saw how

Veronica was bending forward towards his friend and touching one hand of his — for it was not far to see. Taquisara did not look again, but presently he went in, and there was less of unconcern in his handsome bronze face that day, and his dark eyes were harder and colder than they were wont to be.

Veronica liked him, and forgot altogether the unpleasantness which there had been between them. He was as gentle as a woman with Gianluca. He seemed to be strong, too, for on the bad days when his friend could not walk at all, he carried him like a child from room to room. Veronica saw how necessary he was, and he knew it himself, for after his first protest he made no attempt to go away. Gianluca, naturally sensitive and abnormally impressionable, hated to be touched by servants, as some invalids do, and Taquisara's constant presence saved him much suffering, none the less acute because it was imaginary.

At luncheon, at dinner, whenever the Duca and Duchessa were present, Taquisara did his best to help the conversation and always seemed cheerful, unconcerned, and hopeful for Gianluca's recovery. It was on rare occasions, when Veronica found herself alone with him for a few moments, or together with him and Don Teodoro, that the man appeared to her silent, morose, and sometimes almost ill-tempered. He did not again speak rudely in her presence, but she guessed that the unspoken thought

was constantly in his mind — that, and something else which she could not understand. Daily, hourly perhaps, he was inwardly accusing her of playing with Gianluca, as he had expressed it.

Strange to say, she began to care for his opinion and to wish that he could understand her better; and because he could not, she resented the opinion which she thought he held of her. When she was with him, she felt something which she did not recognize in herself — a desire to attack him, for no reason whatever, and at the same time a wish that he might like her better. Even in her childhood she had never cared very much whether people liked her or not.

One day it rained, — for it was in August, — and from time to time the enormous thunder-storms rolled up out of the valley and crashed and split themselves upon the sharp peak above Muro, and rumbled away to northward up the pass, while the deluge of cold rain descended in their track.

It was afternoon. The windows were all shut, the Duca and Duchessa had disappeared for their daily sleep, as they always did, and Veronica and Taquisara kept Gianluca company in one of the big rooms. He was better than usual, but Veronica found it hard to amuse him, and tried to imagine some diversion for the long hours.

"Can you fence?" she asked suddenly, of Taquisara.

"Of course — after a fashion," he answered, with a laugh of surprise at the question, which seemed absurd to him.

"Will you fence with me?"

"I? Oh — I remember hearing that you took fencing lessons at the Princess Corleone's. If it amuses you, of course I will."

"I have all my things here," said Veronica. "There are any number of foils, and I got two men's jackets and masks, just in the hope that they might be wanted some day. I am very fond of it, you know. We can move the table away from the middle of the room — it will be something to do. It is dull, when it rains, and Don Gianluca can watch us and tell me when I make mistakes. It will amuse us all."

"Gianluca could give us both lessons," said Taquisara. "He fences beautifully."

"Ah — if I only could!" exclaimed Gianluca, in a tone that hurt Veronica.

The invalid looked down at his long, thin legs and emaciated hands, and he tried to smile bravely.

"You would rather not see us — we will not do it," said Veronica, gently, bending a little to see his face, as she stood near him.

"Oh no! Please do!" he answered. "I have never seen a woman fence — I cannot imagine how you could. It would amuse me very much. Please send for the foils."

The things were brought, the tables and chairs were moved away, Taquisara drew Gianluca's big easy-chair, with him in it, towards the window, and Veronica put on her leathern jacket and glove, and stood holding her mask in her hand, as she bent over the foils looking for her favourite one. She found it, and came forward, carrying both mask and foil, while Taquisara got ready. Gianluca looked at her and smiled. There was something defiant and warlike about the small, well-poised head, the aquiline features, and the bright eyes. With one foot a little in advance she stood up, straight and daring, in the middle of the room, waiting for her adversary. The grey light of the rainy afternoon gleamed coldly along the steel.

Taquisara took the one of the two masks which fitted him the better, and picked out a foil. He did not think of putting on a jacket to fence with a woman.

"No jacket?" asked Veronica, with a short laugh, as she slipped her mask over her head.

He laughed, too, but said nothing, considering it as a matter of course, and stepping into position he stood before Veronica with lowered foil. She raised hers, saluted him, and then Gianluca, as though they were to fence a bout for a prize. Taquisara did the same.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, in surprise, as both were about to fall into guard. "Are you left-handed?"

"Yes — did you never notice it?" She laughed again, as her foil played upon his for a second. "Now then!" she cried.

Taquisara was not an exceptionally good fencer, and had spent very little time in the study of the art. He was bold, quick, and somewhat reckless, and in two or three slight affairs in which, like most men of his society in the south, he had been unavoidably engaged, he had wounded his adversaries rather by surprise and indifference to his own safety, than by any superior skill. He had expected that Veronica would make a few conventional passes and parries, and grow tired of the sport in a few minutes. To his astonishment, he saw in a moment that she could really fence fairly well, while the fact of being left-handed gave her a great advantage, even against an otherwise superior adversary. He had of course intended and expected only to defend himself without ever really attacking, as men generally do when they fence with women. But he was mistaken in supposing that this was what Veronica wanted.

She tried his wrist once or twice and played a little, feeling her way. Then there was a quick flash, a disengagement, a feint, a lunge that was like a man's, and as her long left arm shot out like lightning, her foil bent nearly double, with the button full on his breast. She stepped back, and he heard her short laugh again, followed by

Gianluca's, and he laughed, too, somewhat disconcerted.

"I took you by surprise," she said. "You had better put on a jacket — it is just as well."

"Oh no — but you can really fence! I had no idea. I shall be more careful. Try again!"

They engaged once more, and Taquisara was cautious. His defence did not compare with his attack, and he could not take the offensive in earnest. He parried her quick thrusts with some difficulty, and presently she touched him on the arm.

"Why do you not attack me?" she asked impatiently. "You need not be afraid — I can defend myself pretty well."

He did not altogether like to lunge as though he were fencing with a man, and his hesitation gave her a still greater advantage. She felt an unaccountable delight in attacking him furiously, and in her excitement she uttered sharp little cries when she touched him, as she did more than once. She felt that she had never fenced so well in her life, and she was glad that she should do better against him than against Bianca or her fencing-master. There was a strange delight in it. He, on his part, did his best at defence, but he could not bring himself to a real attack. He tried to disarm her, by sheer strength, but he failed utterly. Her wrist was more supple than the steel foil itself, and she was left-handed.

It was rather wild play, but it was amusing to watch, and Gianluca looked on with delighted appreciation. She was so slight and graceful, and yet so quick and strong. As for Taquisara, he was glad when she drew back, took her mask from her face, and said that it was enough.

"You ought to know that you can hardly ever disarm a left-handed person when you are engaged in carte," observed Gianluca, looking at Taquisara.

Though he had never been in a quarrel in his life, he had been passionately fond of fencing, and in his real interest in what he had seen he did not even think of complimenting Veronica. She was keen enough to feel that his scientific remark was better than any flattery.

Taquisara shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Donna Veronica fences like a man," he said. "And I am not very good at it either. She would have killed me two or three times!"

"You never really attacked me," she answered, flushed and happy. "By the by," she added, seeing that he was looking over the other foils, "one of those is sharp — the one with the green hilt — be careful not to take it by mistake if we fence again, for you might really kill me."

"How did it come here?" he asked, taking up the one she indicated.

"It was lying about at the Princess Corleone's. I took it by mistake, I suppose, with my things.

I believe that Signor Ghisleri brought it to show her, one day. I think he said it had been used."

She threw off her leathern jacket, and tossed the other things aside.

"Let us fence a little every day," she said. "That is, if you will really fence, instead of playing with me."

"I am certainly not able to play with you," he answered. "And I shall wear a jacket next time."

"You are wonderful," said Gianluca, still watching her with admiration.

The storm had passed, and the rain was over. Before long the Duca and Duchessa would appear for tea, and Taquisara said that he would go for a walk. Veronica rang and had the room set in order again, and sat down by Gianluca. The exercise had done her good, and she still felt that fierce little satisfaction at having fought with Taquisara. There was an unwonted colour in her cheeks, and her brown hair had been somewhat ruffled by the mask. Her hands were warm, and tingled, and she felt intensely alive. It had been pleasant, for once, to put out all her energy in something like a real struggle.

Little by little her sensations wore off, and she was quite quiet again, but the recollection of them remained and made her wish to renew them every day.

"You are wonderful," Gianluca repeated, when they had talked of other things for a while. "Taquisara is not a fencing-master, but he is as good as most men, and better than many. You gave him trouble, I could see. It was all he could do to defend himself against you, sometimes."

"Did it amuse you to watch us?" asked Veronica.

"Yes — of course!"

"Then we will do it again, every day. I am glad of a little practice, and it will not hurt him either. A descendant of Tancred ought to fence better than that! I suppose that your mother would be horrified."

"She might be a little surprised."

"Shall we tell her?"

"Not unless we are obliged to," answered Gianluca, with a smile. "We do not tell her everything."

"No," said Veronica, acquiescing rather thoughtfully.

Gianluca was in that state in which there is a delight in having little, harmless secrets from the world in common with one much loved, but not yet wholly won, and each small secrecy was to the bond that held him what the silver threads are to Damascus steel, welded into the whole that the blade may bend double without breaking. But to Veronica it was different; for she guessed instinctively how he looked upon such trifles, and she did

not wish them to multiply unduly. Each one was a sting to her conscience.

"I hate secrets," she said gravely, after a pause. "Let us tell her. It is much better."

"As you like," answered Gianluca, with a little disappointment, which she did not fail to notice.

"You think that she will be scandalized? And that we shall not fence any more? Why? I am sure, if she could see us, she would think it very proper. It is not improper, is it?" She asked the last question anxiously, as though in an afterthought.

"Improper? No! How absurd! If everything that is unusual were to be considered improper, our writing to each other would be improper, too. But we kept it a secret, all the same. I cannot imagine talking about it. For me — everything that belongs to you is a secret."

Veronica leaned back in her chair, and her face grew still more grave, but she did not answer. The struggle had begun again, and the hesitation. Should she tell him, once for all, that she really never could love him? Should she leave him the illusion he loved so well? Was he to die, or was he to live? The answer to each question seemed to lie in the query of the next. He spoke again before she broke the silence.

"Do you not feel that — a little — not as I do,

but just a little, about me?" he asked in a voice not timid, but very soft.

"No," she answered sadly. "Not as you do. No; it is quite different."

She did not look at him at once, for she was almost afraid to meet his eyes, but she heard him catch his breath, as though to strangle a sigh by main force, and his head moved on the cushion.

She had begun to hurt him.

"I thought you might," he said, faintly but steadily. "I almost thought you did."

"No," she repeated, with ever-increasing gentleness. "No. Do not think that — please do not!"

He said nothing, but again he moved his head. Then, seeing that the moment had come, and that she must face it with truth or lie to him while he lived, she turned her face bravely towards him, to tell him all her heart.

"You are the only real friend I have in the world," she said. "But I can never love you — never, Gianluca — never. It is not in me. There is no one in the whole world for whom I care as I do for you. I cannot imagine anything that I could not do for your sake. But not love — not love. That is something else. I do not know what it means. You could make me understand anything but that. Oh — why must I say it, when it is so hard to say?"

His face seemed cut, as a mask of pain, in alabaster, and the appealing, hungry eyes waited for each fresh hurt.

"You made me think that you might love me," he said, the slow words hardly forming themselves on his dry lips.

"Then God forgive me!" she cried, clasping her hands and bending her face over them. "And yet — and yet I knew it. I felt it. I meant to tell you, if you did not know! I only wished not to hurt you — it is so hard to say."

"Yes," he answered, scarcely above his breath. "I see it is," he added, after a long time.

As he lay in the deep chair, he turned his face from her, on the cushion, till she could not see his eyes, and then was quite still. It would have been easier if he had reproached her vehemently, if he had turned and tried to win her again, and poured out his heart full of love. But he lay there, like a dead angel, with his face turned from her, hardly breathing.

"I have been cowardly, and base, and bad!" she cried, bending over her clasped hands, and speaking to herself. "I should have said it — I said it long ago, at Bianca's, and I should have said it again — but I was afraid — afraid — oh! afraid!"

Her low voice trembled in anger against herself, in pity for him, in sorrow for them both. She looked up and saw him still motionless. It was

as though she had killed him and were sitting beside his body. But he still lived, and might live. For one instant she felt a mad impulse to give him her life, to marry him, not loving him, to save him if she could, to atone for what she had done. But a horrible under-thought told her that it would be but gambling for her freedom with his existence, and that if she did it, she should do it because she felt that he must surely die. Even her simplicity seemed gone. She looked again; he had not moved.

She threw herself upon her knees, beside his great chair, her clasped hands on his thin shoulder, in a sort of agony of despair.

"Speak to me!" she cried. "Forgive me — say that I have not killed you — Gianluca — dear!"

One shadowy hand of his was lifted, and touched hers. It was as cold as though it had lain dead in the dew. She took it quickly and held it fast. He did not turn his head.

"It has been my life," he said, "my whole life."

He did not try to draw away his hand, but let her hold it, if she would. There was still magic in her touch.

"Forgive me!" she repeated more softly, and her cheek touched the arm of the chair. "Forgive me!"

At last he turned his face very wearily and slowly

on the brown silk cushion, and looked at her bent head. Instinctively she raised her hot eyes.

"Forgive you?" He spoke very sorrowfully. "I love you. What is there to forgive? It is not your fault — "

"It is — it is!" she cried, speaking into his sad eyes for forgiveness, with all her soul.

"I shall die — but it is not your fault," he answered, and he sank back, for he had raised himself a little. "It is not your fault," he repeated. "Do not ask me to forgive you. Perhaps I should have lived longer — I do not know, for I only lived for you. No — I am quiet now. I can speak better than I could. You must not think that you have killed me, if I die. Men live through worse, but not men like me, perhaps. Something else is killing me slowly, but they will not tell me what it is. Never mind. It will do as well without a name, and if I get well, it needs none. After all, I am not dead yet, and while I am alive, I can love you. You have been all to me. If you had loved me, I should have had more than all the world, and that would have been too much. If I deceived myself, loving you as I did, — as I do, — it is not your fault, Veronica. It is not your fault. There was a time last year, when I would have done anything, given everything, life and all, for one of a thousand words you have written and said to me since then — when I would have committed crimes

for the touch of this little hand. Do you see? It is all my fault. That is what I wanted you to understand."

He had said all he could, and his breath came with an effort at the last. But his lips smiled bravely as he looked at her, still kneeling by his side. Then he seemed to realize that she should not be there.

"Get up, dear," he said, with failing voice. "You must not kneel — some one might come — they would think — that you meant — something."

His lids quivered and closed, and his lips trembled oddly. She felt his hand relax, and she thought that he was gone. Instantly she sprang to her feet beside him, and lifted his head, her face full of the horror that goes before the wave of pain for those one loves. But he had not even fainted. He opened his eyes, and smiled, and tried to speak again, but could not.

Veronica's lips moved, too, as she stood there, supporting him a little with her arm and stiffened with terror for his life. But she could not speak either. She watched his face with most intense anxiety. Again and again, he opened his eyes, and saw her, and he felt her arm under him.

"It is nothing," he said suddenly. "I was a little faint."

She drew away her arm with a deep breath of relief, and he sighed when it was gone. But

neither of them spoke. Veronica rang, and sent for his favourite wine, and he drank a little of it. Then she sat down beside him, where she had sat before, and the room was very still.

It was hot, too, for no one had opened the window since it had stopped raining. Veronica rose and undid the fastenings and threw back the glass, and the cool air rushed in, laden with the sweet smell of the wet earth. As she came back, she saw that his eyes followed all her movements, gravely, as a sick child watches its nurse moving about its room. There was no reproach in their look, but they were still fixed on her, when she sat down again by his side.

"Veronica," said the faint, far voice, presently. "May I ask you one question, that I have no right to ask?"

"Anything," she answered. "And you have the right to ask anything."

"No — not this. Do you love another man?"

The still blue eyes widened, in earnestness.

"No, Gianluca. No — by the truth of God — no living man!"

"Nor one dead?" His tone sank almost to a whisper, and still his eyes were wide for her answer.

A faint and tender light came into her face, so faint, so far reflected from an infinite somewhere, that only such eyes as his could have seen it.

"There was Bosio," she said softly. "He spoke

to me the night he died — I could have married him — I should have loved him — perhaps."

If the little phrases were broken, it was not by hesitation; it seemed rather as though what they meant must find each memory to have meaning, one by one, and word by word — and finding, wondered at what had once been true.

And Gianluca smiled, as he lay still, and the lids of his eyes closed peacefully and naturally, opening again with another look. He was too weak to be surprised by what he had only vaguely guessed, from some word she had let fall, but he knew well enough, from her voice and face, that she had never loved Bosio Macomer, nor any other man, dead or living. And Hope, that is ever last to leave a breaking heart, nestled back into her own sweet place, breathing soft things of love, and life, and golden years to be.

"Thank you," he said. "I should not have asked you. It was kind to answer."

They did not speak again, and presently the door opened. The old Duca held it back with a stately bow, and the Duchessa swept into the room with that sort of uncertain swaying motion, which is all that weakness leaves of grace. And the Duca shuffled in after her, and closed the door most precisely, for he was a precise old man.

"I thought it was time for tea, my dear," said the Duchessa. "We have had such a good sleep!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Though Gianluca had seemed to gain strength during the first week of his stay at Muro, he appeared to lose it even more rapidly after that memorable afternoon. It was not that he lost heart and control of courage; on the contrary, he spoke all at once more hopefully, and grew most particular in the carrying out of each detail of the day, precisely in the manner prescribed by the doctors. He forced himself to eat, he did his best to sleep a certain number of hours, he made Taquisara carry him out into the air and back again at fixed times, in order that the extreme regularity of his life might help his recovery if possible. But all this was of no use. It had seemed inconceivable that he should grow more thin, and yet his face and throat and hands shrunk day by day. He could not use his legs at all, now, and he told no one that he had hardly any sensation in them.

The Duchessa prayed for her son, always in her own room and sometimes in the church, whither she went often alone in the afternoon, and sometimes accompanied by her husband. She even curtailed her daily siesta in order to have more time

for prayer. No doubt, she would have given anything in the world for Gianluca, but she had very little else to give, beyond that sacrifice, which did not seem small or laughable to her. The Duca said little, but often shook his head, unexpectedly, and his weak eyes were watery. He sometimes walked twenty-five times round the top of the big lower bastion, under the vines that grew upon the trellis over it, before the midday breakfast, while the Duchessa was at her devotions. At every round, when he came to the point fronting the valley he paused a moment and repeated very much the same words each time.

"My poor son! My poor Gianluca!" he said, and then shuffled round the bastion again.

Taquisara scarcely left the sick man's side except when Gianluca could be alone with Veronica. He was evidently very anxious, though his face betrayed little of what he felt. He knew it, and was glad that nature had given him that bronze-like colour, which could hardly change at all. When the whole party were together, he talked; he talked when he was alone with Gianluca; but when he was with Gianluca and Veronica he spoke in monosyllables. Once she noticed that he was biting his lip nervously, just as he turned away his face.

Though Gianluca was worse, without doubt, he insisted that there should be no change in his way of spending the day. To amuse him, Veronica and

Taquisara fenced a little of an afternoon. But the Sicilian had no heart in it, and evidently did not care whether Veronica touched him or not, and his indifference annoyed her, so that she sometimes worked herself into little furies of attack, and he, rather than really attack her in return and oppose his strength, broke ground and let himself be driven back across the room.

"Some day I shall take the foil with the green hilt," laughed Veronica. "Then you will really take the trouble to fight me."

The foil with the green hilt was the sharp one which had got among the others by mistake. Taquisara smiled indifferently.

"My life is at your service," he said, in a tone that seemed a little sarcastic.

"Keep it for those who need it," she answered, laughing again, and glancing at Gianluca.

Her tone was a little scornful, too, and Gianluca watched them both with some surprise. Almost any one would have thought that they disliked each other, but such a possibility had never struck him before. He would have admitted that Veronica might not like Taquisara, but that any one in the world should not like Veronica was beyond his comprehension. He spoke to his friend about it when they were alone.

"What is the matter between you and Donna Veronica?" he asked that evening, before dinner.

"Nothing," answered Taquisara, stopping in his walk. "What do you mean."

"I think you dislike her," said Gianluca.

"I?" The Sicilian's strong voice rang in the room. "No," he added quietly, and recovering instantly from his astonishment. "I do not dislike her. What makes you think that I do?"

"Little things. You seem so silent and out of temper when she is in the room. To-day when she was laughing about the pointed foil you answered her sarcastically. Many little things make me think that you do not like her."

"You are mistaken," said Taquisara, gravely. "I like Donna Veronica very much. Indeed, I always did, ever since I first saw her. I am sorry that my manner should have given you a wrong impression. I always feel that I am in the way when I am with you two."

"You are never in the way," answered Gianluca.

After that, Taquisara was very careful, but more than ever he did his best not to remain as a third when the Duca and Duchessa were away, and Veronica and Gianluca could be together. The fencing alone was inevitable, and he hated it, though he went through it with a good grace almost every day, since Veronica seemed so unreasonably fond of the exercise.

She and Gianluca did not refer to what had hap-

pened, and to what had been said, when she had told him the truth. She, on her part, felt that she had done right, and that it was the sort of right which need not be done again. But he, poor man, was not so wholly undeceived as she thought him to be. Since she loved no one else, he could still hope that she might love him.

Yet he felt his life slipping from him, and he made desperate efforts to get well, insisting upon every detail of his invalid existence as though each several minute of the day had a healing virtue which he must not lose. He was sure that his chance of winning the woman he loved lay in living to win her, and he grappled his soul to his frail body with every thrill of energy that his dying nerve had left, with all the tense moral grip that love and despair can give. And yet it seemed hopeless, for his strength sank daily. At last he could not even sit up at table, and remained lying in his low chair, while the others ate their meals hastily in order not to leave him long alone.

The doctor came, a clever young man, whom Veronica had procured for the good of the village. He shook his head, though he tried to speak cheerfully to Gianluca's father and mother. But he advised them to send for the great authority whom they had consulted in Naples, and under whom he himself had studied. Veronica spoke with him in an outer room.

"I fear that he cannot live, but I am not infallible," he said.

"How long will he live, if he is going to die?" asked Veronica, pale and quiet.

"Do not ask me — it is guess-work," answered the young doctor. "I think he may live a fortnight. He is practically paralyzed from his waist downwards — it is almost complete. What he eats does not nourish him."

"What has caused this?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders, smiled faintly, and made a gesture which in the south signifies the inevitable.

"It is a decayed race," he said; "a family too old — there is no more blood in them — what shall I say?"

"I do not believe that has anything to do with it," replied Veronica, rather proudly. "The Serra are as old as they. Did you see that gentleman who is Don Gianluca's friend? He is descended from Tancred."

"It is other blood," said the doctor.

He went away, and the great physician who lived in Naples was sent for at once. A carriage went down to Eboli to meet him. He came, looked, asked questions, and shook his head, very much as his pupil had done. He stayed a night, and when it was late, Veronica and Taquisara were alone with him. He was a fat man, with enormous

shoulders and very short legs, and a round face and dreamy eyes set too low for proportion of feature. Taquisara thought that he was like a turtle standing on its hind flippers, preternaturally endowed with a hemispherical black stomach, and a large watch chain; but the idea did not seem comic to him, for he was in no humour to be amused at anything.

The professor — for he was one — talked long and learnedly, using a number of Latin words with edifying terminations. In spite of this, however, he was not without common sense.

"I have known people to recover when they seemed to have no chance at all," he said.

"But you do not expect him to live?" asked Taquisara, pressing him.

"It is a desperate case," answered the physician.

Being very fat, and having travelled all day, he went to bed. Veronica remained alone in the drawing-room with Taquisara. The latter slowly walked up and down between two opposite doors. Veronica kept her seat, her head bent, listening to his regular footsteps.

"Donna Veronica —" he stopped.

"Yes," she answered, not looking up, but starting slightly at the sound of his voice. "What do you wish to say?"

"You know that I have not always been fortunate in what I have said to you, and that makes me

hesitate to speak now. But it seems to me that, as Gianluca is really in the care of us two —"

"Well?" Still she did not turn to him, though he paused awkwardly, and began to walk again.

"Gianluca asked me the other day whether I disliked you," he said.

"Well? Do you?" Her tone was unnaturally cold, even to her own ears.

He stood still on the other side of the table, looking towards her.

"No," he said, as though he were making an effort. "If he asked me the question, it must be that I have behaved rudely to you before him. Have I?"

"I have not noticed it," answered Veronica, as coldly as before.

"It would certainly not have been intentional, if there had been anything to notice. If I speak of it now, it is because Gianluca spoke to me, and because, if we are to talk about him, the way must be clear. You say that it is? May I go on?"

Veronica did not answer at once. Then she rose slowly, turned, and stood before the low, long chimneypiece.

"Why should we talk about him at all?" she asked, at length determining what to say. "We shall not agree, and we can only repeat what we have both said before now. It can be of no use."

"I have something more to say," replied Taquisara.

"Yes. There may be more to be said, that may be better not said. I know what it is. You once accused me of playing with him. You said it rudely and roughly, but I have forgiven you for saying it. You would have more reason for saying it now than you had then, and I should be less angry. You have a better right to speak, and I have less right to defend myself. But I will speak for you. I am not afraid."

"No. That is the last thing any one could say of you!"

"Or of you, perhaps," she said, more kindly, and it was the first word of appreciation she had ever given him. "We are neither of us cowards. That is why I am willing to tell you what I think of myself. It is almost what you think of me — that I have done a thousand things which might make Don Gianluca, and his father and mother, too, believe that if he recovers I mean to marry him. But you think me a heartless woman. I am not. There are things which you neither know, nor could understand if you knew them. I will ask you only one question. Is there any imaginable reason why I should wish to hurt him?"

"None that I can guess," answered Taquisara, looking into her eyes.

"Then you must understand what I have done.

Out of too much friendship I have made a great mistake. What you can never understand, I suppose, is, that I can feel for him what you do — just that, and no more — or more of that, perhaps, and nothing else. A woman can be a man's friend, as well as a man can. I never played with him — as you call it — though you have enough right to say it. I told him from the first that I could never marry him. I told him so again on the day when we had first fenced, and you went to walk after the rain."

"That is why he has been worse, since then. It began that very evening."

"Yes. I know it. Do you think I do not reproach myself for having gone so far that I had to speak? Indeed, indeed, I do, more than you know. But what am I to do? He cannot go away, ill as he is. I cannot leave you all here. And then, I would not leave him, if I could. He is more to me than I can ever tell you — I would give my right hand for his life. Would you have me marry him, knowing that I can never love him? Is that what you would have me do?"

Taquisara was silent for a moment, looking earnestly at her, and he bit his lip a little.

"Yes," he said. "That is what you should do. It is all you can do, to try and save his life."

The moment he had spoken he turned from her and began to walk up and down again.

"Do you know what you are asking?" Veronica followed him with her eyes.

"It is a sacrifice," he said, pursuing his walk and not glancing at her. "It is to give your life for his. I know it. But you can hardly give him more than he has given you — or you have taken from him. Yes — I know what the doctors say, that it is a disease which is known and understood. No doubt it is. But diseases of that sort may remain latent for a lifetime, unless something determines them. Until they have gone too far, they may be overcome. If he had not lived for weeks in a state of nervous tension that would almost make a strong man ill, he would not be in such a condition now. If he had never known you, he might have been as well as he ever was — he might have been well for twenty or thirty years, before it attacked him. It is not all your fault, but a part of it is. Take your friendship, and your mistakes, together — your wish that he may live, and your responsibility if he dies — two motives are better than one, when the one is not strong enough. You have two, and good ones. Marry him, Donna Veronica — marry him and save his life, if you can, and your own remorse if he dies. Let me go to him now — he is not asleep — let me tell him that you have changed your mind, or made up your mind — that you love him, after all —"

"Please do not go on," said Veronica, drawing

back a little, till she leaned against the mantelpiece.

He had placed himself in front of her before he had finished speaking. He was excited, vehement, and not eloquent—like a man driven to bay by a crowd to argue a question in which he had no conviction, but which concerns his life. He stopped speaking when she interrupted him, and he seemed to be waiting for her to say more. She had drawn herself up a little proudly, with her head high.

"You hurt me," she said, breaking the silence, and hardly knowing why she said the words.

"Do you think it costs me nothing?" he asked, in a low voice.

His eyes burned strangely in the lamplight. But he turned away quickly, to resume his walk. She could not help asking him a question.

"Why should it cost you anything? You are speaking for your friend — but I —"

She did not finish the sentence, for it seemed to her selfish to throw her right to happiness into the scale against Gianluca's life. But she could not understand him.

"It is hard to do, for all that," he answered indistinctly. "I have said too much," he continued, stopping before her. "I meant to do the best I could. Perhaps I should have said nothing. This is no time to stop at trifles. The man is dying, and I have a right to say that I believe you might save

his life — and a right to beg you to try. You have the right to refuse, to question, to doubt — all rights that are a woman's in such a case. As for me — there is no question of me in all this. Since I must be here for him, since I have displeased you from the first, since you do not like me, look upon me as a necessary evil, do not consider my existence, think of me as a man who loves your best friend and is giving all he has — to save him."

"All you have," repeated Veronica, thoughtfully, but without a question.

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

The single word was spoken with a sort of passion, as though it meant much to him. She liked him better now than when he walked up and down, giving her incoherent advice. Whatever he might mean, it was something which had power to move him.

"You are mistaken," she said. "I like you very much."

"You — Princess!" His surprise was genuine. "You have not made me think so," he added in a tone of wonder.

"Nor have you made me think that you liked me," she answered.

"Gianluca thought I did not," said Taquisara, slowly, as though speaking to himself.

Veronica smiled.

"When I first knew you, when we talked

together at the villa on that morning before Christmas, I liked you better than him," she said.

He started sharply.

"Please —" He checked himself almost before the one word had escaped his lips.

"Please — what?" she asked, naturally enough.

"Nothing."

His face quickened as he walked again, and she watched him curiously.

"As friends of one friend, we must be friends," she said, after a pause. "We have spoken frankly to-night, both of us. It is much better. With his life between us we can say things, perhaps, which neither of us would have said before. You are doing all you can. You ask me to do more than I can — I think. As for his life — let us not talk of what may happen. I think of it enough, as it is."

She turned as she spoke the last words, for she did not trust her face. But he heard the true note of sorrow in her tone.

"Is it possible that you do not love him a little?" he asked, in a low voice.

"It is true," she answered mechanically, as though hearing him in a dream "I could never love him."

Then, all at once she straightened herself and left the chimneypiece.

"We must not talk of these things any more,"

she said. "Good night. We understand each other, do we not?"

She held out her hand to him, which she very rarely did. He took it quietly.

"I understand you — yes," he said.

She looked at him a moment longer, smiled faintly, and then left the room. After she was gone, he sat down in the chair she had occupied, crossed one knee over the other, folded his hands, and stared at the carpet. He sat there for a long time, motionless, as though absorbed in the study of a difficult problem. But his expression did not change, and he did not speak aloud to himself as some men do when they are alone and in great trouble, as he was then. He was not a man of theatrical instincts, nor, indeed, of any great imagination. Least of all was he given to anything like self-examination, or arguing with his conscience. He was exceedingly simple in nature. He either loved or hated, either respected or was indifferent or despised altogether, with no half-measures nor compromises.

Just then he was merely revolving the situation in his mind, and trying to see some way of escaping from it, without abandoning his friend. But no way occurred to him which did not look cowardly, and when he rose from his seat, he had made up his mind to face his troubles as well as he could, since he could not avoid them.

He went to Gianluca's room before he went to bed. A small light burned behind a shade in a corner, and at first he could barely see the white face on the white pillow. The sick man lay sound asleep, breathing almost inaudibly, one light hand lying upon the coverlet, the other hidden. Gradually, as Taquisara looked, his eyes became accustomed to the light, and he gazed earnestly at his sleeping friend. He saw the dark rings come out beneath the drooping lids, and the paleness of the parted lips, and the terrible emaciation of the thin hand.

But there was life still, and hope. Hope that the man might still live and stand among men, hope that he might yet marry Veronica Serra — and be happy. In the half-darkness, Taquisara set his teeth, biting hard, as though he would have bitten through iron, lest a sharp breath should escape him and disturb the sleeper's rest.

That frail thing, that ghost, that airy remnant of a man, lay there, alive in name, between Taquisara and the mere right to think of his own happiness; and next to the reality of the shadow of his dream, he loved best on earth this shadow of reality that would not die. For he loved Veronica with all his heart, and after her, Gianluca della Spina. Above both stood honour.

He knew that he was loyal and true as he stood there, and that there was not in the inmost inward heart of him a mean, double-faced wish that his

friend might die there, peacefully, and leave to the winning of the strong what the weak had wooed in vain. He had spoken the truth when he had said that for his friend's life he was giving all he had, when he did his best to persuade Veronica that she must marry the dying man, in the bare hope of saving him while there was yet time. He had done his best, though it was no wonder that there was no conviction, but only vehemence, in his tone. It had been different on that day, now long ago, when he had first spoken for Gianluca in the garden. He had not loved her then. She had been no more to him than any other woman. But even on that day, when he had left her, he had half guessed that he might love her if opportunity gave possibility the right of way. He had guessed it, and even to guess it was to fear it, for Gianluca's sake. He was not quixotic. Had he been first, death or life, he would not have given another room at her side, had that or that man been twenty times his friend or his brother. Even if it had been a little otherwise, if Gianluca had not confided in him from the beginning, and had stood out as any other suitor for her hand, Taquisara, as he loved her now, would hardly have drawn back because his friend had been before him. But Gianluca had come to him, told him all, asked his advice, taken his help — all that, when Veronica had still been nothing to Taquisara — less than nothing, in a way, because she was such a

great heiress, and he would have hesitated before asking for her hand, being but a poor Sicilian gentleman of good repute, few acres, and old blood.

He was loyal to the core of his sound soul. Whatever became of him, Gianluca was to be first in his actions, wherever Veronica might stand in his heart, and he had the strength to do all that he meant to do. He would do it. He knew that he should do it, and he was glad, for his honour, that he could do it.

He had avoided all meetings, as much as possible, from the first, going rarely to Bianca's house, and then not talking with Veronica when he could help it. For each time that he saw her, he felt that soft mystery of attraction in which great passion begins; that something which touches and draws gently on, and presses and draws again more gently, yet with stronger power, growing great on nothings by day and night, till it drives the senses slowly mad, and overtops the soul, and pricks, then goads, then drives — then, at the last, tears men up like straws in its enormous arms, rising on sudden wings to outstrip wind and whirlwind in the wild race that ends in death or blinding joy, or reckless ruin of honour, worse than any death.

He had felt the growing danger at every one of their few meetings, and, being simple, he mistrusted himself to be what other men were. But in that, he was not like the many. He was not of the kind

and temper to break down in loyalty, and he could still bear much more. Under strong pressure, he had come with Gianluca to the gates of Muro, and he had done his best to get away at once. Fate had been against him. He was still strong, and could face fate alone. He did not pine, and waste bodily, as Gianluca had done. But he turned his eyes away when he could, and spent his hours out of danger when he might, waiting for the moment when he should be free to go and live his own life alone, husbanding the strength which was not lacking in him, setting his teeth hard to bear the pain, — a simple, brave, and loyal man, caught in fate's grip, but silently unyielding to the last.

It was his nature to suffer without complaint, when he must suffer at all. No one can tell whether those feel pain most who show least what they feel. The measure of pain is always man, and no man can really be measured except by himself. We often believe that they who utter no cry are the most badly hurt, perhaps because silence has suggestion in it, and noise has none. No one knows the truth. No one has stood in the fire that scorches his brother's soul, to tell us which can suffer the more.

Taquisara lay long awake that night, and every word that had passed between Veronica and him came back to his thoughts.

More than once he rose and, crossing the intermediate room, went to Gianluca's side. Once the

latter was awake, still half dreaming, and looked up wonderingly into his friend's eyes. He scarcely knew that he spoke, as his lips moved.

"I am going to die," he said, in a far-off tone.

Taquisara bent over him quickly, trying to smile.

"Nonsense — no — no!" he said cheerfully. "You have been dreaming — you are better."

"Yes — I am dreaming — let me sleep," answered the sick man, hardly articulating the words.

And in a moment, he was asleep again. Taquisara listened to his breathing, bending down a moment longer. Then he went softly away. He himself slept a little, but it seemed long before the morning broke.

When it was broad daylight, Gianluca seemed better, for the deep sleep had refreshed him. It was still very early, when the professor appeared and paid him a long visit, asking a few questions at first and then suddenly beginning to talk of politics and the public news. Taquisara left the room with him, and they stood together in Gianluca's sitting-room.

"He is better, is he not?" asked the Sicilian, eagerly.

To his surprise the doctor shook his head and was silent a long time.

"I know nothing," he said, at last. "Nobody knows anything. Surgery is a fine art, but medicine is witchcraft, or little better. You see, I

speak frankly. I can only give you my experience, and that may be worth something. I have seen two cases of this kind in which, when the change came, the patients partially recovered, and lived for several years, paralyzed downwards from the point in the spine where the disease begins. I have seen several cases where death has resulted rather suddenly."

"And do you see a change coming?"

"Yes. It has begun already. Is he a devout man?"

"A religious man, at all events," answered Taquisara, gravely.

"Then, if he wishes to see a priest, it would be as well to send for one this morning. But if he wishes to be moved as usual, and dressed, let him have his way. Do not frighten him, if you can help it. No moral shock can do any good. I leave it to you. It is of no use to tell his father and mother. They are here, and you will see if he is worse. I suppose you know that he suffers great pain when he is moved?"

"No!" said Taquisara, anxiously. "I did not know it. I sometimes hear him draw his breath sharply once or twice — but he never complains. I thought it hurt him a little."

"It is agony," said the doctor. "He must be a very brave man."

The professor seemed much impressed by what Taquisara had said.

CHAPTER XXV.

Taquisara went immediately to find Don Teodoro, who was generally at home at that hour, in his little house just opposite the castle gate. He found him with his silver spectacles pushed up to the top of his head, his long nose buried in a musty volume, a cup of untasted coffee at his elbow, absorbed in study. The small room was filled with books, old and new, and smelt of them. As Taquisara entered, the old priest looked up, screwing his lids together in the attempt to recognize his visitor without using his spectacles. He took him for the syndic of Muro, a respectable countryman of fifty years, come to consult with him about some public matters.

"Be seated," he said. "If you will pardon me, for a moment — I was just — "

In an instant his nose almost touched the page again, and he did not complete the sentence, before he was lost in study once more. Taquisara sat down upon the only chair there was and waited a few moments, not realizing that he had not been recognized. But the priest forgot his existence immediately and if not disturbed would probably have gone on reading till noon.

"Don Teodoro!" said Taquisara, rousing him. "Pray excuse me —"

The old man looked up suddenly, with an exclamation of surprise.

"Dear me!" he cried. "Are you there, Baron? I beg your pardon. I think I took you for some one else."

He drew his spectacles down to the level of his eyes, and let the big book fall back upon the table.

"Our friend is very ill," said Taquisara, gravely. "That is why I have come to disturb you."

He told the priest what the doctor had said about Gianluca's condition. Don Teodoro listened with an expression of concern and anxiety, for he had become fond of the sick man during the past weeks, and Gianluca liked him, too. Almost every day they talked together, and the refined taste and sincere love of literature of the younger man delighted in the profound learning of the old student, while the latter found a rare pleasure in speaking of his favourite occupations to such an appreciative listener.

"The fact is," Taquisara concluded, "though I have not much faith in doctors, I really believe that he may die at any moment. You know what kind of man he is. Go and sit with him after luncheon to-day — or before — the sooner, the better. Do not frighten him — do not tell him that I have spoken to you about his condition. I believe that

he knows it himself, and if he is alone with you for some time, and you speak of the uncertainty of life, as a priest can, he will probably himself propose to make his confession. You understand those things, Don Teodoro — it is your business. It is our business to give you a chance."

"Yes — yes," answered the old man. "I daresay you are right. I suppose that is what I should do." There was a reluctance in his voice which surprised Taquisara.

"You do not seem convinced," said the latter.

"I wish there were another priest here," replied Don Teodoro, thoughtfully, and his clear eyes looked away, avoiding the other's direct glance.

"Why?" inquired the Sicilian, with increasing astonishment.

"It is a painful office to perform for a friend." The curate looked down now, and fingered the corner of his old book, in evident hesitation. "It is quite another thing to assist the poor."

"I do not understand you," said Taquisara. "I suppose that priests have especial sensibilities of their own —"

"Sometimes — sometimes," interrupted Don Teodoro, as though speaking to himself. "Yes — I have especial sensibilities."

"It cannot be helped," answered Taquisara, in a tone that had something of authority in it. "Of course we laymen do not appreciate those nice ques-

tions. A man is dying. He wants a priest. It is your place to go to him, whether he is your own father, or a swineherd. You are alone here, and you have no choice."

"Yes, I am alone. I wish I were not. I wish that the princess would get me an assistant."

"It will be best if you come to the castle in about an hour," said Taquisara, paying no attention to Don Teodoro's last remark. "By that time Gianluca will be in his sitting-room, and I shall be with him. The Duca and Duchessa will be out for their walk, for the weather is cool and fine, and they do not know of his imminent danger. Come in without warning, as though you had just come to pay him a visit of a quarter of an hour. You have done the same thing before. I will go away after five minutes and leave you together. Donna Veronica will not interrupt you."

"Very well," replied the priest, in a tone that was still reluctant. "If it must be, it must be."

Taquisara looked at him curiously and went away to arrange matters as he proposed. But Don Teodoro, though he wore his spectacles, with the help of which he really could see very well, did not notice the young man's glance of curiosity, as he went with him to the door, and carefully fastened it after him, which was an unusual proceeding on his part; for though he lived quite alone, the poor people never found that door locked by

day or night. An old woman came every day to do the little household work that was necessary, and to cook something for him, when he ate at home. But to-day, for once, he drew the rusty old bolt across, before he went back to his study. He did nothing which could seem to have justified the precaution, after he had sat down again in his big wooden easy-chair; and if the door had been wide open, and if any one had come in without warning, the visitor would have found the priest before the table, slowly lifting one long, bent shank of his silver spectacles and letting it fall upon the other, in a slow and absent-minded fashion to which no one could have attached any especial importance. People who have kept a secret very long and well, keep it when they are alone, even when it turns its bones in the narrow grave of their hearts, reminding them that it is there and would be glad to see if it could get a vampire's dead life for a night, and come out, and draw blood.

Taquisara went away and re-entered the castle, walking more slowly than was his wont. In the narrow court within, he stopped before passing through the door, and stood a long time staring at a fragment of a marble tablet with a part of a Roman inscription cut on it, which was built into the enormous masonry of the main wall and had remained white while the surrounding blocks had grown black with age. There was no more appar-

ent reason why he should try to make out the meaning of the inscription, than why Don Teodoro should play so long with his glasses, all alone in his room. But Taquisara was not thinking of Don Teodoro. He had a secret of his own to keep from everybody, and if possible from himself.

But that was not easy. The thing which had taken hold of him was as strong as he was and seemed to be watching him, grip for grip, hold for hold, wrench for wrench. It had not beaten him yet, but he knew that to yield a hair's breadth would mean a fall, and a bad one. He had almost relaxed his strength that little, last night, when he had been alone with Veronica.

He read the letters of the inscription over twenty times, then turned sharply on his heel and went in, having probably convinced himself that to waste time over his own thoughts was the worst waste imaginable, since the more he thought of anything, the more he loved Veronica. And he had set himself to arrange the meeting between Gianluca and Don Teodoro, and each hour was precious.

His face helped him, for he did not easily betray emotion; he rarely changed colour at all, and was not a man of mobile features. But he had grown thinner since he had been in Muro, and the clearly cut curves that marked the Saracen strain in him were sharper and more defined.

He went in and met Veronica in the large room in which they usually fenced, and which lay between what was really the drawing-room and the apartment set aside for Gianluca and Taquisara. She was standing alone beside the table, her face very white, and as she turned to Taquisara, he saw something desperate in her eyes.

"I have seen the doctor again," she said, not waiting for any greeting, and knowing that he would understand.

"And I have seen the priest," answered Taquisara.

She started, and pressed her lips tightly to suppress something. Her eyes wandered slowly and then came back to the Sicilian before she spoke.

"You have done right," she said, and then paused a second. "He is going to die to-day," she added, very low.

"That is not sure," replied Taquisara. "The doctor says that he has known cases —"

"No," interrupted Veronica. "I know it — I feel it."

She was resting one hand on the heavy table, and as she spoke she bent down, as though bowed in bodily pain. Taquisara saw the sharp lines in the smooth young forehead, and his teeth bit hard on one another as he watched her. He could not speak. With a quick-drawn breath she straightened herself suddenly and looked at him again.

He thought he saw the very slightest moisture, not in her eyes, but on the lower lids and just below them. It was very hard to shed tears, and not like her.

"Hope!" he said gently.

During what seemed a long time they stood looking at each other with unchanging faces, and neither spoke. Some people know that dead silence which descends while fate's great hand is working in the dark, and men hold their breath and shut their eyes, listening speechless for the dull footfall of near destiny.

At last Veronica, without a word, turned from the table and went slowly towards a door. Taquisara did not move. When her hand was on the lock, she turned her head.

"Stand by me, whatever I do to-day," she said earnestly.

"Yes. I will."

He did not find any eloquent words nor oaths of protest, but she saw his face and believed him. She bent her head once, as though acknowledging his promise, and she went out quietly, closing the door behind her.

Some minutes passed before Taquisara also left the room in the other direction. He wondered why she had said those last words, for he had seen again that desperate look in her face and did not understand it. Perhaps she meant to marry

Gianluca before he died, and at the thought Taquisara felt as though a strong man had struck him a heavy blow just on his heart, and for one instant he steadied himself by the table and swallowed hard, as though the breath were out of him. It did not last a moment. Then he, too, went out, to go to his friend.

Gianluca was gentle, quiet, almost cheerful, on that morning. He had evidently forgotten that he had opened his eyes and seen Taquisara standing by his bedside in the night, nor would he have thought anything of so common an occurrence had it come back to his recollection. He certainly did not remember having spoken of dying. But he was very weak, and his face was deadly pale, rather than transparent, as it usually seemed.

Taquisara had thought of what the doctor had said about his sufferings, and hesitated before lifting him to carry him to the next room.

"Tell me," he said, "does it hurt you very much when I take you up?"

"It hurts," answered Gianluca, with a smile. "Hurting is relative, you know. I can bear it very well. There are things that hurt more."

"What? When you try to move alone?"

"Oh no! Imaginary things. You hurt me very little — you are so careful. What should I have done without you?"

Taquisara had never touched him so tenderly

before, though he was always as gentle as a woman with him. He lifted him, carried him from his bedroom and laid him in his accustomed chair. The pale head rested with a sigh upon the brown silk cushion.

"Thank you," he said faintly. "That was better than ever. But I am better to-day, too."

The Sicilian said nothing, but proceeded to arrange all the invalid's small belongings near him, — his books, his cigarettes, — for he sometimes smoked a little, — and the stimulant he took, and a few wild flowers which Elettra renewed every morning. Gianluca drew a breath of satisfaction when all was done. He really felt a little better, and by Taquisara's care had suffered less than usual in the moving. His father and mother had been in to see him as usual, before he was up, and before they went out for their daily walk. Veronica would not come yet, but he had the true invalid's pleasure in anticipating the coming of a well-loved woman. As often happens in such cases he seemed quite unconscious of his approaching danger.

He was not surprised when Don Teodoro came in, a little later, and the two very soon fell into conversation together. Taquisara presently went away and left them, as he often did when they began to talk of books. Half an hour had not passed since his meeting with Veronica, but as he

again entered the room where they had met, he found her standing before the window, looking out, and twisting her handkerchief slowly with both her hands. She started when she heard him come in, and she turned her head to see who it was that had opened the door. To go on, he had to pass near her, and she kept her eyes on his face as he approached her.

"How is he?" she asked in a voice hardly recognizable as her own.

She had an agonized look, and she raised her handkerchief to her mouth quickly, and held it, almost biting it, while he answered her.

"He says that he feels better. Don Teodoro is there. He has just come. Is there anything that I can do?"

She shook her head, still holding the handkerchief to her lips, and again looked out of the window. He waited a moment longer and then passed on, leaving her alone. He saw that she was half mad with anxiety, and he neither trusted himself to speak, nor believed that speaking could be of any use. He went down to the lower bastion, where he could be alone, and for a long time he walked steadily up and down, trying hard to think of nothing, and sometimes counting his steps as he walked, in order to keep his mind from itself.

He did not idealize the woman he loved, for he was not a man of ideals, nor of much imagination.

Such defects as she might have, he did not see, and if he had seen them he would have been indifferent to them. To such a man, loving meant everything and admitted of no comment, because there was no part of him left free to judge. He was a whole-souled man, who asked no questions of himself and no advice of others. He had never needed counsel, in his own opinion, and for the rest, what he felt was himself and not a secondary, dual being of separate passions and impressions which he could analyze and examine. He had never comprehended that strange machine of nicely-balanced doubts and certainties, forever in a state of half-morbid equilibrium between the wish, the thought, and the deed — such a man as Pietro Ghisleri was, for instance, who would refuse a beggar an alms lest the giving should be a satisfaction to his own vanity, and then, perhaps, would turn back in pity and give the poor wretch half a handful of silver. When Taquisara once knew that he loved Veronica, he never reverted to a state of doubt. He fought against it, because his friend had loved her first, and rooting himself where he stood, as it were, he would have let the passion tear him piecemeal rather than be moved by it. But he never had the smallest doubt as to what the passion was in itself and might be, in its consequences, if he should be weak for one moment. Simple struggles, when they are for life

and death, are more terrible than any complicated conflict can possibly be.

Don Teodoro was a long time alone with Gianluca. Whatever reasons he had of his own for not wishing to comply with Taquisara's request, he overcame them and faithfully carried out the mission imposed upon him. In itself it was no very hard one. Gianluca was a religious man, as Taquisara had said that he was, and he knew that he was very ill, though he did not believe himself to be dying. With his character and in his condition, he was glad to talk seriously with such a man as Don Teodoro, and then to lay before him the account of his few shortcomings according to the practice of his belief.

The old priest came out at last, grave and bent, and, going through the rooms, he came upon Veronica standing alone where Taquisara had left her. She did not know how long she had stood there, waiting for him. He paused before her, and her eyes questioned him.

"He wishes to see you," he said simply.

"How is he?" He had not understood her unspoken question. "How is he?" she repeated, as he hesitated a moment.

"To me he seems no worse. He says that he feels better to-day. But there is something, some change — something, I cannot tell what it is, since I last saw him."

"Stay here — please stay in the house!" said Veronica. "He may need you."

While she was speaking she had gone to the door, and she went out without looking back. A moment later, she was by Gianluca's side. She saw that what Don Teodoro had said was true. There was an undefinable change in his features since the previous day, and at the first sight of it her heart stood still an instant and the blood left her face, so that she felt very cold. She kept her back to the light, that he might not see that she was disturbed, and while she asked him how he was, her hands touched, and displaced, and replaced the little objects on the small table beside him, — the book, the glass, the flowers in the silver cup, the silver cigarette case, the things which, being quite helpless, he liked to have within his reach.

"I really feel better to-day," he said, watching her lovingly, as he answered her question. "I wish I could go out."

"You can be carried out upon the balcony in a little while," she said. "It is too cool, yet. It was a cold night, for we are getting near the end of August."

"And in Naples they are sweltering in the heat," he answered, smiling. "It is beautiful here. I can see the mountains through the open window, and the flowers tell me what the hillsides

are like, in the sunshine. Taquisara says that your maid brings them every morning. Thank you — of course it is one of your endless kind doings."

"No," replied Veronica, frankly. "It is her way of showing her devotion, poor thing! Everybody loves you in the house — even the people who have hardly ever seen you. The women speak of you as 'that angel'!" She tried to laugh cheerfully.

"I am glad they like me, though I have done nothing to be liked by them. Please thank your maid for me. It is very kind of her."

There was a little disappointment in his voice; for he had been happy in believing that Veronica sent the flowers herself, not because he needed coin of kindness to prove her wealth of friendship, but because whatever small thing came from her hand had so much more value for him than the greatest and most that any one else could give.

She sat down beside him, and endeavoured to talk as though she were quite unconcerned. She tried not to look at his face, upon which it seemed to her that death was already fixing the last mask of life's comedy. It was the more terrible, because he was so quiet and so sure of life that morning, so convinced that he was better, so almost certain that he should get well.

It seemed an awful thing to sit there, talking against death; but she did her best not to think,

and only to talk and talk on, and make him believe that she was cheerful, while, in a kind way, she kept him from coming back to within a phrase's length of his love for her. It was hard for him, too, to make any effort. The doctor had said so. And all the time, she fancied that his features became by degrees less mobile, and that the transparent pallor so long familiar to her was turning to another hue, grey and stony, which she had never seen.

Suddenly, while she was speaking of some indifferent thing, his eyelids closed and twitched, and his hand went out towards hers, almost spasmodically. She caught it and held it, bending far forward, and again her heart stood still till she missed its beating.

"What is it?" she asked, staring into his face, and already half wild with fear.

He could shake his head feebly, but for a moment he could not speak. With one of her hands she still held his, and with the other she pressed his brow. He smiled, as in a spasm, and then his face was a little distorted. She felt his life slipping from her, under her very touch, as though it were her fault because she would not hold it and keep it for him.

"Gianluca!" she cried, repeating his name in an agonized tone. "Gianluca! You must not die! I am here—"

He opened his eyes, and the faint smile came back, but without a spasm this time.

"It was a little pain," he said. "I am sorry — it frightened you."

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, still bending over him. "Oh — I thought you were gone!"

"Your voice — would bring me back — Veronica," he said, with many little efforts, word by word, but with life in his face.

She moved, and held the glass to his lips. Bravely he lifted his hand, and tried to hold it himself. He drank a little of the stimulant, and then his pale head sank back, with the short, fair hair about his forehead, like a glory.

"Ah yes!" he said, speaking more easily, a moment later. "Death could never be so near but that you might stand between him and me — if you would," he added, so softly that the three words just reached her ears, as the far echo of sad music, full of beseeching tenderness.

Still she held his hand, and gazed down into his face. They had told her long ago that he was dying of love for her. In that moment she believed it true. He seemed to tell her so, to be telling it with his last breath. And each breath might be the last. Science could not save him. Physicians disagreed — the great authority himself could not say whether he was to live or die. He fainted, fell back, seemed dead already, and her voice and touch

brought him to life, happy for an instant, hoping still and living only by the beating of hope's wings. And with all that, though she did not love him, he was to her the dearest of all living beings. Holding his hand still, she looked upward, as though to be alone with herself for one breathing space. But as she stood there, she pressed his fingers little by little more tightly, not knowing what she did, so that he wondered.

Then she bent down again, and steadily gazed into the upturned blue eyes, and once more smoothed away the fair hair from the pallid brow.

"Do you wish it very much?" she asked simply.

Half paralyzed though he was, he started, and the light that came suddenly to his face, wavered and sank and rose once more. She seemed to hear his words again, saying that she could stand between death and him, were death ever so near.

"You?" he faltered. "Wish for you? Ah God! Veronica—" his face grew dead again. "No—no—I did not understand—"

"But I mean it!" she said, in desperate, low tones, for she thought he was sinking back. "I will marry you, Gianluca! I will, dear—I will—I am in earnest!"

Slowly his eyes opened again and looked at her, wide, startled, and half blind with joy. So the leader looks who, stunned to death between the

door-posts of the hard-won gate, wakes unhurt to life in the tide of the victory he led, and hears the strong music of triumph, and the huge shout of brave men whose bursting throats cry out his name for very glory's sake, their own and his.

Gianluca's eyes opened, and with sudden pressure he grasped the hand that had so long held his, believing because he held it and felt the flesh and blood and the warmth in his own shadowy hold.

"Veronica — love!" She would not have thought that he could press her fingers so hard, weak as he was.

The word smote her, even then, with a small icy chill, and though she smiled, there was a shadow in her face. Again he doubted.

"Veronica — for the love of God — you are not deceiving me, to save my life?" The vision of despair rose in his eyes.

"Deceive you? I?" she cried, with sudden energy. "Indeed, indeed, I mean it, as I said it."

"Yes — but — but if, to-morrow —" Again his voice was failing, and she was hand to hand with death, for him.

"No! There shall be no to-morrow for that — it shall be now!"

"Now? To-day? Now?"

He seemed to rise and sink, and sink and rise again, on the low-surging waves of his life's ebbing tide.

"Yes — now!" she answered. "This moment. Don Teodoro is in the house — I will call him — let me go for a moment — only one moment!"

"No — no! Do not leave me!" He clung frantically to her hand. "But — yes — call him — call him! And Taquisara. He is my friend — Oh! It kills me to let you go!"

It was indeed the very supreme moment. The great burst of happiness had almost killed him, and he was like a child, not knowing what he wanted. Still he clutched her hand. A quick thought crossed her mind. She had gone to the window for a moment, to fasten it back, and had seen Taquisara walking under the vines. He might be there.

"Let me go to the window," she said, regaining her self-possession. "Taquisara may be on the bastion — I saw him there. He will call Don Teodoro, and I shall not have to leave you."

Any reasoning which kept her by his side was divinely good. Her words calmed him a little, and his hands gradually loosened themselves. But as she turned quickly, he uttered a very low cry, and tried to catch her skirt. She did not hear him. She was already speaking from the window; for the Sicilian was still there, walking up and down, as he had done for more than an hour. She called to him. He started, and looked up through the broad leaves.

"Get Don Teodoro at once, and bring him," she cried. "He is in the house — somewhere."

Taquisara thought that Gianluca was dying, and neither paused nor answered, as he disappeared within.

Veronica came back instantly. She had not been gone thirty seconds, but already the sick man's face was grey again, though his eyes were wide and staring. His head had fallen to one side, on the brown silk cushion, in his last attempt to reach her. With both hands, she raised him a little, so that he lay straight again.

"They are coming — they are coming, dear one!" she repeated. "Live, live! Gianluca — live, for me!"

In her agony of fighting for his life, she pushed his hair back, and pressed her lips in one long kiss upon his forehead. A shiver ran through him, and the sense came back to his eyes. But though she held his hand, there was no more strength in it to grasp hers. He sighed the words she heard.

"Love — is it you? Veronica — love — life! Ah, Christ!"

And his lids closed again. The door opened, and was shut, and Veronica half turned her head to see, but she brought her face tenderly nearer to his, as though to let him know that it was for his sake she looked away. Don Teodoro and Taquisara were both in the room. Even before she spoke,

she had changed her hold upon Gianluca's fingers, and held his right hand in hers, as those hold hands who are to be wedded.

"Bless us!" she said to the priest. "This is our marriage! Say the words — quickly!"

Taquisara's face was livid, for he had as much of instant death in him as the dying man, though he could not die. But he did not fail. He came and knelt on the other side of the couch, away from Veronica. The priest stood at the foot, in pale hesitation. Veronica's eyes commanded.

"Speak quickly!" she said. "I will marry him — I have said it! Gianluca — say it — say that you will marry me!"

Holding his right hand, with her left thrust under his pillow she lifted him so that he sat almost upright. It needed all her strength, and she was very desperate for him.

"Volo!" The one word floated on the air, breathed, not spoken, and dead silence followed.

Again Veronica turned to Don Teodoro.

"Say the words. I command you! I have the right — I am free!"

The priest's face was white now. He stretched out his arms, lifting his eyes upwards.

A worse change was in Gianluca's face before Don Teodoro had spoken the words he had to say. Taquisara saw it. Both he and Veronica bent over the motionless head. Still Veronica held the cold

hand in hers. Taquisara knew that in another instant the priest would speak. Gently, with womanly tenderness, though his soul was on the wheel of anguish, he took Veronica's right hand and loosed it, and Gianluca's fell cold and motionless from her fingers.

"He is gone," he whispered, close to her ear, and he held her right hand firmly, in his horror at the thought that she might be wedded to a man already dead.

Veronica made a slight effort of instinct, to loose his hold and to take the hand that had fallen from hers. But it was only instinctive and hardly conscious at all. Her eyes were on Gianluca's face, and the blackness of a vast grief already darkened her soul.

There was but an instant. The tall old priest, with eyes lifted heavenwards, neither saw nor heard.

"Ego conjungo vos—" He said all the words, and then, high in air, he made the great sign of the cross. "Benedictas vos omnipotens Deus—" and he spoke all the benediction.

He closed his eyes a moment in instant prayer. When he opened them and looked down, his face turned whiter still. On each side, before him, knelt the living, Veronica and Taquisara, their hands clasped and wedded, as they had been when he had spoken the high sacramental words, and

between them, white, motionless, the halo of his fair hair about his marble brow, lay Gianluca della Spina, like an angel dead on earth.

"Merciful Lord! What have I done!" cried the priest.

At the sound of his voice Taquisara turned quickly. But Veronica did not hear. The Sicilian saw where Don Teodoro's starting eyes were fixed, and he understood, and his own blood shrieked in his ears, for he was married to Veronica Serra. Married — half married, wholly married, married truly or falsely, by the sudden leap of violent chance — but a marriage it was, of some sort. Both he and the priest knew that, and that it must be a voice of more authority than Don Teodoro's which could say that it was no marriage. For the Church's forms of office, that are necessary, are few and very simple, but they mean much, and what is done by them is not easily undone. But Veronica neither saw nor heard.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I THINK — I assure you that nobody knows anything — but I think that Don Gianluca will improve rapidly after this crisis."

That was the opinion of the great doctor, when he had seen the patient on the afternoon of that memorable day. For Veronica, Taquisara, and Don Teodoro had all three been mistaken when they had thought that Gianluca was dead. As the doctor said, there had been a crisis, an inward convulsion of the nerves, a fainting which had been almost a catalepsy, and, several hours later, a return to consciousness with a greatly increased chance of life, though with extreme momentary exhaustion.

It was Taquisara who went to find the doctor, leaving Veronica on her knees, while Don Teodoro stood motionless at the foot of the couch, his hands gripping each other till his nails cut the flesh, his grotesque face invested for the moment with an almost sublime horror of what he had unwittingly done.

And then had come the physician's systematic and painful search for life, his doubts, his hopes, his suspicions, his increasing hope again, his cer-

tainty at last that all was not over — and then the necessity for instantly carrying out his orders, the getting of all things needed for the sick man snatched out of death, and all the confusion that rises when the whole being of a great household must exert its utmost strength in one direction, to save one life.

Amidst it all, too, the helpless father and mother ran about tearful, incoherent, wringing their hands, believing no one and yet believing the impossible, praying, crying, talking, hindering everything in their supreme parents' right to be in the way and nearest to what they loved best — hysterical with joy, both of them, at the end, when the physician said that Gianluca was to live, and was not dead as they had thought him, and wildly, pathetically, insanely grateful to Veronica.

"I saw that he was dying," she told them simply, when he was out of danger. "I sent for Don Teodoro, and we were married."

They fell upon her neck, the old man and the prematurely old woman, kissing her, pressing her in their arms, crying over her, not knowing what they did.

When he saw that she was telling them, Taquisara went away from them to his own room and stayed there some time. And Don Teodoro also went home, and for the second time on that day he bolted his battered door and made sure that he was

alone. But he did not sit at his table playing with his spectacles, as in the morning. He knelt in a corner, against one of his rough bookcases, bowed to the ground as though a mountain had come upon him unawares, and now and then he beat his forehead against the parchment bindings of his favourite folio Muratori, as certain wild beasts crouch on their knees and with a swinging of slow despair strike their heads against the bars of their cage many times in succession.

For Taquisara and Don Teodoro knew, each knowing also that the other knew, that what Veronica believed to have been done that day had not been really done, save in the intention, and that what had really been done must by Church law and right be undone before she could be truly married to Gianluca della Spina. That is to say, if the thing done had any value whatsoever before God and man.

It is easy to say that in other lands and under other practices of faith the four persons concerned in what had happened might have honestly told themselves that such a marriage was no marriage at all. An unbelieving Italian, and there are many in the cities, though few in the country, would have laughed and said that the important point was the legal union pronounced by the municipal authority, and that since there had been none here, there was nothing to undo. Yet if by any similar

chance — more difficult to imagine, of course, but conceivable for argument's sake — the same mistake had occurred in a legal marriage by a syndic, that same unbelieving Italian would have felt in regard to it precisely what Taquisara and Don Teodoro felt, namely, that the union was well nigh indissoluble. For Italy, as a nation and a whole, while imitating other nations in many respects, has again and again refused to listen to any suggestion embodying a law of divorce. To all Italians, high, low, atheists, bigots, monarchists, republicans, — whatever they may be, — marriage is an absolutely indissoluble bond. The most that they will allow, and have always allowed, is that in such cases as Veronica's, it is in the power of the highest authority, ecclesiastic or legal, according to their persuasion, to annul a marriage altogether and declare that it never took place at all, on the ground that the requirements of the Church or of the law have not been properly fulfilled.

In society, of the two forms, which are both looked upon as necessary together, the blessing of the Church is considered by far the more indispensable, though most people acknowledge the importance and validity of the other, as well as its wisdom; and society, as an aristocratic body, as a rule refuses absolutely to receive within its doors an Italian couple who have not been married by a priest. Among all society's many traditions and

prejudices, there is none more ancient, more deep-rooted, or more rigorous to-day than this one.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that Taquisara, strong, loyal, and simple as he was, should honestly believe with all his heart that he had been married to Veronica; nor that Don Teodoro himself should look upon what he had unwittingly done as being something which he alone had no power to undo, if, in all conscience and truth, it had been done at all.

The worst point of all, in the opinion of those two men, was that Veronica sincerely believed herself married to Gianluca, as in her intention she really was, while Gianluca himself, having pronounced the solemn 'I will' with his last conscious breath and being told on coming to himself that the sacramental words had been spoken, had no reason at all for doubting that he was actually her husband. The position was as full of difficulties as could be imagined. To let Gianluca know the truth would have been almost certain to kill him. To speak of it to Veronica for the present seemed almost equally impracticable, though it was quite impossible to take any steps towards the annulling of the marriage without her open concurrence and help, as well as Taquisara's. Meanwhile, not only she and Gianluca, but the Duca and Duchessa, too, regarded the matter as altogether settled and accomplished. At any moment

Veronica had it in her power to send for the syndic of Muro and cause the necessary formalities of the municipal marriage to be properly executed. She would then be legally married to Gianluca, while in the eyes of the Church she was already Taquisara's wife, by the fact of form though not by the intention of any one.

It did not occur either to Taquisara or to the priest that they could keep their secret forever and allow matters to proceed to such a conclusion. Don Teodoro was far too earnest a believer and a churchman at heart to allow what he should consider a great sin to be committed without any attempt to hinder it, and with the Sicilian the point of honour was concerned, as well as a deeply rooted adherence to social tradition and to the forms and ceremonies of religion in which he had been brought up. They were neither of them men to have so repudiated all they held the most sacred in faith and honour, even if either of them had held the secret alone without the other's knowledge.

But each knew that the other knew the truth, and on that first day, each departed to his own room lest he should be suddenly brought face to face again with the other.

It was his unwillingness to allow a thing to be done which, as a man and a gentleman, he thought both dishonourable and wrong, that prevented Taquisara from leaving Muro at once. For himself,

his first impulse was to escape from the situation, from the horrible temptation he endured when he was with Veronica, from the barest possibility of any unfaithfulness to his friend. At that time the Italians were fighting in Massowah and as an officer of the reserve he could have volunteered for active service at a moment's notice — with a terribly good prospect of never coming back alive.

But even his death would hardly have mended matters, in his scrupulous opinion, unless Veronica should of her own accord and without any especial reason insist upon being again married in church, contrary to the Church's own rule, but on the reasonable ground that Gianluca had been unconscious during a part of the ceremony. If Taquisara were dead, such a marriage would be valid, of course; but the prospect of his death gave him no assurance that she would ever do such a thing at all; and, moreover, in spite of his passionate temperament, he was far too sensible a man to think deliberately of sacrificing his life for such reasons. Like many another man suddenly placed in a hard position as an obstacle in the path of a loved woman, he asked himself the question, whether, in honour and against religion, he should not commit suicide. But the answer was a foregone conclusion, and it was plainly his duty to stand by his friend and by Veronica, alive and able to do the best he could for them both. In immediate present circum-

stances his presence was of the greatest importance to Gianluca, who depended on him almost entirely for help, in his sensitive dislike of being touched and moved by servants.

And the man who was thus thrust into a situation from which it seemed hard to escape at all, loved Veronica Serra with all his heart, with all his soul, with the broad, deep, simple passion of simpler times, having in him much of that old plainness of character which made men take without question the things they wanted, and hold them by main strength and stoutness of heart against all comers while they lived.

There had been a time when he had been able to speak coldly to her, and to seem to dislike her. That was past, and his devotion was even in his hands and visible, if he did with them the smallest act for her service.

She saw it, and was glad, for he pleased her more and more in the days that followed the great day, while Gianluca lay pale and happy and gaining a little strength, and she, as his wife, sat through many hours of the day by his bedside, reading to him, and telling him much about her life, but not often allowing him to speak much, lest he should lose ground and be in danger again. It seemed to her at that time that Taquisara was learning to be another friend to her, less in most ways than Gianluca had been, but having much that Gianluca

had not — the strength, the decision, the toughness. She did not miss those things in Gianluca. She would not have had him otherwise than he was, but she saw them all, and felt their influence, and admired them in the other man.

She felt, too, that she had often treated him with unnecessary and almost unmannerly coldness, and repenting of it, she meant, in pure innocence of maiden purpose, to make it up to him now, by being more kind. Indeed, she could not understand why she had ever been so hard to him in former days, excepting when he had spoken so rudely to her at Bianca's house; and since she had seen and learned to value his loyal affection for Gianluca, she had not only forgiven him for what he had said, but had found that, on the whole, he had been right to say it.

As for her marriage with Gianluca, it seemed to her to have changed nothing, beyond the great change it had wrought in him for the better. She talked with him as before. She felt, as before, that he was her dearest and best friend. To please him, she made plans with him for their future, though sometimes the sharp fear for his life ran through her heart like a needle of ice. They could live half the year in Naples and the other six months in Muro, but sometimes, when he should be quite well, they would travel and see the world together. It was pleasant to think that they had

the right to be always together, now, for it would have seemed terrible even to Veronica to go back to the old days of letter-writing. To her, their marriage had been the final cementing of the most beautiful friendship in the world. She was glad that she had given her life for him, since, after all, the giving of it now changed it so little. It was clear, she thought, that she was made for friendship and not for love; and since she was so made, she had done the best in marrying her best friend.

One day, when Gianluca was asleep, she had gone alone to her little rose garden up by the dungeon tower. The autumn was beginning in the mountains; there were few roses left, and the northerly breeze blew up to her out of the vast depth at her feet. Alone there, she thought of all these things and of how she was intended by her nature for this friendship of hers. Reasoning about it with herself, she took an imaginary case. Suppose, she thought, that she had begun to be Taquisara's friend, instead of Gianluca's, on that day in Bianca's garden. Her mind worked quickly. She pictured to herself the long correspondence, the intimacy of thought, the meeting and the destruction of the dividing barrier, the daily, hourly growing friendship, and then — the marriage, the touch of hands, the first kiss.

The scarlet blood leapt up like fire to her face.

She started and looked round, half dreading lest some one might be there to see. But she was quite alone, and she wondered at herself. It must be shame, she thought, at the mere idea of marrying another man when she was Gianluca's wife. At all events, she said in her heart, she would not think of such things again. It was probably a sin, and she would remember to speak of it, at her next confession. Don Teodoro would tell her what he thought. For in lonely Muro, she had no other confessor, nor desired any. Her faults, great and small, were such as she would have acknowledged and discussed with the good man, in her own drawing-room as willingly as in church — as, indeed, she often did. But not wishing to be alone with herself any longer on that day, she came down from the tower and went to her room, where she spent an hour with Elettra in examining the state of her very much reduced wardrobe.

"Your Excellency is in rags," observed the woman. "You cannot appear in Naples as a bride with any of the things you have. In the first place, you have scarcely anything that is not black or white. But also, though some of these clothes had a cheerful youth, their old age is very sad."

Veronica laughed at Elettra's way of expressing herself, and they went over all the wardrobe together that afternoon.

As Taquisara saw how those around him seemed

to have recovered from the terrible emotions through which they had passed, and how the life in the castle quickly subsided again to its monotonous level and ran on in its old channel, the temptation to solve all difficulties by letting matters alone presented itself to him with considerable force. Ten days had gone by, and he had not once found himself alone with Don Teodoro. When they met, they avoided each other's eyes, and each remained separately face to face with the same trouble, while each had a trouble of his own with which the other had nothing to do.

There was little or no change now from what had formerly been the daily round. Again, as before, Taquisara carried his friend daily from his own room to the large one in which Veronica and the Sicilian again fenced almost every day. Sometimes, when it was fine and warm, Gianluca was taken out upon the balcony for a couple of hours. He no longer suffered in being moved; but his lower limbs were now completely paralyzed. He hardly thought of the fact, in his constant and increasing happiness. It was only when he saw the fencing that he sometimes looked down sadly at his useless legs and thin hands, for fencing was the only exercise for which he had ever cared. He had none of that sanguine vitality which would have made such an existence intolerable to Taquisara, or even to Veronica. With her beside him,

or if he could not have her, with books or conversation, he was not only contented, but happy. It must be remembered, too, that he was not aware that his condition was hopeless and that he might live a total cripple for many years to come. If he had known that, he might have been less gay; not knowing it, married to the woman he loved and looking forward to complete recovery, life was little short of a paradise within sight of a heaven.

Veronica never tired of taking care of him, and one might have supposed that she was satisfied with the prospect of nursing him all her life, or all his. But she herself by no means believed the doctor's predictions. She had been too sure that he was to die, and too much surprised and delighted by his recovery, to accept on mere faith of any man's verdict the assurance that he was never to walk again. There was the reaction, too, after the strong emotion and the heart-rending anxiety, the relaxation of mind and nerve, and the willingness to be happy again after so much strain and stress.

As Gianluca's general health improved, the Duca and Duchessa began to speak of an early departure for their own place near Avellino. Their eldest son's illness had placed him first with them, but they had several other children, all of whom had been under the care of a sister of the Duchessa during the latter's stay at Muro. The motherly woman

was beginning to be anxious about them, and the old gentleman had a fair-haired little daughter of eleven summers, whom he especially loved and longed to see.

They thought that before long Gianluca might be moved. It was growing colder, day by day, in the first chill of early autumn, and they believed that a little warmth would do him good. Veronica should come and pay them a visit, and Taquisara, too.

As for the marriage, they meant that it should be an open secret for a little while longer. The servants knew of it, and would tell other servants of course, and the Duchessa had written of it to her sister, on hearing which fact Veronica had written to Bianca Corleone, telling her exactly what had happened, lest Bianca should hear of it from some one else. It was long before she had an answer to this letter, and when it came Bianca's writing was full of her own desperate sadness, though there were words of congratulation for Veronica, such as the occasion seemed to require. Bianca wrote from a remote corner of Sicily, where she was living almost alone on her husband's principal estate. There had been trouble. Corleone had suddenly taken it into his head to come home for a few weeks. Then Bianca's brother, Gianforte Campodonico, had appeared and had taken a violent dislike to Pietro Ghisleri, so that Bianca feared a quarrel

between them. Before anything had happened, she had induced Ghisleri to go to Switzerland, and she herself had gone to Sicily, whither her brother had accompanied her. But he had been obliged to leave her soon afterwards, and she suspected that he had followed Ghisleri to the north in order to pick a quarrel with him. She was very unhappy, and there was much more about herself in her letter than about Veronica's marriage.

The old couple grew daily more anxious to leave for Avellino. They proposed that as soon as Gianluca could safely travel, the whole party should go there together. Before returning to Naples for the winter, the legal formalities of the municipal wedding could be fulfilled, and the marriage should then be formally announced. Gianluca and Veronica would come and spend the winter in the Della Spina palace, wherein, as in all Italian patriarchal establishments, there was a spacious apartment for the establishment of the eldest son whenever he should marry.

Once, when this was discussed before them, Taquisara met Don Teodoro's eyes, and the two men looked steadily at each other for several seconds. But even after that they avoided a meeting. It did not seem absolutely necessary yet, and each knew that the other had not yet found the solution of the difficulty. To every one's surprise, Gianluca opposed the plan altogether. They all seemed to

have taken it for granted that he need not be consulted, and Veronica, in her complete self-sacrifice, would have been willing to do whatever pleased the rest. But Gianluca quietly refused to go to Avellino at all. So long as his wife would give him hospitality, he said with a proud smile, he would stay in Muro. After that, he should prefer to return directly to Naples. It was not easy to argue against an invalid's prerogative. After some fruitless attempts to move him, his father and mother temporarily desisted.

"You shall not go to Avellino," he said to Veronica, when they were alone. "It is a den of wild children and intolerable relations, and you would not have a moment's peace. You have no idea how detestable that sort of existence would be after this heavenly calm. I am very fond of my father and mother, and my brothers and sisters, and my relations, and most of them are very good people in their way. But that is no reason why you and I should be set up to be looked at, and talked at, by them all, twelve hours every day."

"I would certainly much rather stay here," answered Veronica, with a little laugh. "That is, if you can induce them to stay here, too."

"For that matter, they are quite unnecessary," said Gianluca. "There is no reason in the world why, if you like, we should not have the legal marriage here since you have a syndic and a munici

pality. Then we could announce it, and there would be no objection to our staying here alone."

"That is true," replied Veronica, thoughtfully. "We could always do that, if we chose."

But she did not propose to do it at once, and he did not like to press her. He saw no harm, however, in speaking of the project with Taquisara. The Sicilian looked at him, said nothing, and then carefully examined a cigar before lighting it. He had long expected that such a proposal would come either from Gianluca or Veronica, and he was not surprised. But when he at last heard it made he held his breath for a moment or two and then began to smoke in silence.

"You say nothing," observed Gianluca. "Do you see any possible objection to our doing that? Society ought to be satisfied."

"I should think so," answered Taquisara. "I should think that anything would be better than Avellino and all the relations. As for going back to Naples and having a municipal wedding there, and no religious ceremony, I would not do it if I were you. The two marriages are always supposed to take place on consecutive days, or at least very near together, since both are necessary nowadays."

"I know," said Gianluca.

Taquisara made up his mind that he must take the initiative and speak with Don Teodoro. He had been willing and ready to give up all right to hope

for the woman he loved, in order that his friend might marry her, but the idea that there should be an irregularity about the marriage, or no real marriage at all, as he believed was the case, was more than he could, or would, bear. To speak with Veronica was out of the question. He knew enough of women to understand that if she ever knew how, by an accident, she had held his hand instead of Gianluca's at the moment when she was giving her very soul to save the dying man, she might never forgive him. She might even turn and hate him. She would never believe that he himself had not known what he was doing. If it were possible, he would not incur such risk. Anything in reason and honour would be better than to be hated by her. He had seen her change of manner, of late, and he knew very well that she was beginning to like him much more than formerly.

In the morning, after Don Teodoro had said mass, Taquisara went to him and found him over his books. This time the priest recognized him at once and rose to greet him gravely, as though he had expected his visit.

"Have you made up your mind what to do?" asked the Sicilian, as he sat down.

It was as though they had been in the habit of discussing the situation together, and were about to renew a conversation which had been broken off.

"I know what I shall have to do, if matters go

any further," answered the priest, in a dull voice, unlike his own.

"What would that be?"

"It is in my power to cause the marriage to be declared null and void."

"By appealing to your bishop, I suppose. In that event Donna Veronica would have to be told."

"There is another way."

"Then why do you not take it and act at once? Why do you hesitate?" Taquisara watched him keenly.

"Because it would mean the sacrifice of my whole existence. I am human. I hesitate, as long as there is any other hope."

"I do not understand. As for sacrificing your existence — that must be an exaggeration."

"Not at all. If it were only my own, I should not have hesitated, perhaps. I do not know. But what I should do would involve a great and direct injury to many others — to hundreds of other people."

Taquisara looked at him harder than ever, understanding him less and less.

"You seem to have a secret," he said at last, thoughtfully.

"Yes," answered the priest, resting his elbow on the old table and shading his eyes with his hand, though there was no strong light to dazzle him. "Yes — yes," he repeated. "I have a secret, a

great secret. I cannot tell it to you — not even to you, though you are one of the most discreet men I ever met. You must forgive me, but I cannot."

"I do not wish to know it," replied Taquisara. "Especially not, if it concerns many people."

A short silence followed, during which neither moved, nor looked at the other.

"Don Teodoro," asked the Sicilian, at last, in a low voice, "please tell me your view of the case, as a priest. Am I, at the present moment, in consequence of what happened a fortnight ago, actually married to Donna Veronica, or not?"

The priest hesitated, looked down, took off his spectacles, and put them on again, before he answered the question.

"I think," he said, "that most people, if any had been present, would be of opinion that it was enough of a marriage to require a formal annullation before any other could take place. I should certainly not dare to consider the princess and Don Gianluca as married, when it was you who held her right hand, and received the benediction with her in the prescribed attitude."

"Yes," answered Taquisara; "but in your own individual opinion, as a priest, am I married to her, or not?"

"As a priest, I can have no individual opinion. I can tell you, of course, that the marriage can be annulled. In the first place, you neither of you

had the intention of being married to each other. In all the sacraments, the intention of those to whom they are administered is the prime consideration. It would only be necessary for you and the princess to swear that you had no intention of being married, and that it was, to the best of your knowledge, entirely an accident, and all difficulties could be removed."

"Ah, yes! But then Donna Veronica would know, and Gianluca would have to know it, too. I came here to tell you that they are seriously thinking of sending for the syndic, to publish the banns of marriage at the municipality and marry them legally, after which the Duca and Duchessa will go to Avellino, and leave them here together. Whether it costs your existence or mine, Don Teodoro, this thing shall not be done."

"No," said Don Teodoro. "It shall not. You are in a terrible position yourself. I feel for you."

"I?" Taquisara bent his brows. "I, in a terrible position?"

"Do not be angry," answered the priest, gently. "I know your secret well enough, though she does not guess it yet. Do not think me indiscreet because I mention the fact. It would be far better if you could go away for the present. But I know how you are situated, and you are helping to prevent mischief. We must help each other. If it is to cost the existence of one of us, it shall be mine.

You are young, and I am old. And that is not the only reason. My secret is not like yours. I cannot let it go down into the grave with me. I have kept it long enough, and I should have kept it longer, if this had not happened. I shall probably go to Naples to-morrow. You must prevent them from publishing the banns until I come back, or until you hear from me. I may never come back. It is possible."

"What do you mean?" asked Taquisara, for he saw a strange look in the old man's clear eyes.

"I shall not end my life here," he said quietly.

"You? End your life? You, commit suicide? Are you mad, Don Teodoro?"

"Oh no! I may live many years yet. I hope that I may, for I have much to repent of. But I shall not live here."

"I hope you will," said Taquisara. "But if you know my secret — keep it."

"As I have kept mine till now," answered the old man.

So they parted, and Taquisara went back to the castle, leaving the lonely priest among his books.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Veronica did not wish the people of Muro to believe that she was marrying a cripple. That was the reason why she did not at once agree to Gianluca's proposal and send for the syndic to perform the legal ceremony. She had persuaded herself that by quick degrees of improvement, he would recover the power to stand upright, at least to the extent to which he had still retained his strength when he had first arrived. Since he had lived through the crisis, she grew sanguine for him and hoped much.

Her feeling was natural enough in the matter, though it was made up of several undefined instincts about which she troubled herself very little — pride of race, pride of personal wholeness and soundness, pride of womanhood in the manhood of a husband. Veronica named none of these in her thoughts, but they were all in her heart. Few women would not have felt the same in her place.

She was sure that he was to get better, if not quite well, and she wished that he might be well enough to stand beside her on his feet when they should be formally married. If he continued to

improve as rapidly as during the past fortnight, she believed that the day could not be far off. When he could stand, in another month, perhaps, the syndic should come. It was even possible that by that time he might be able to walk a little with her in the village.

Her people were a sort of family to her. That was a remnant of feudalism in her character, perhaps, which had suddenly developed during the months she had spent in Muro. But that, too, was natural, as it was natural that they should love her and almost worship the ground she trod. For the poorer classes of Italians are sometimes very forgetful of benefits, but are rarely ungrateful. She had done in a few months, for their real advantage, so that they felt it, enough to make up for the oppression of generations of Serra, and almost enough to atone for the extortions of Gregorio Macomer. She was the last of her name, and her husband, if he lived, was to be the father of a new stock, which would be called Serra della Spina, and whose men would hold the lands and take the rents and do good, or not, according to their hearts, each in his generation. It seemed to her that the people had a right to see Gianluca standing on his feet beside her, since her marriage was to mean so much to them.

Don Teodoro came to her, soon after Taquisara had left him, to tell her that he must go to Naples

without delay. She looked at him in astonishment at the proposal, and as she looked, she saw that his face was changed. Oddly enough, he held himself much more erect than usual; but his features were drawn down as though by much suffering, and his eyes, usually so clear and steady, wandered nervously about the room.

"You are not well," said Veronica. "Why must you go now?"

"It is because I must go now that I am not well," answered the priest, shaking his head. "I am very sorry to be obliged to leave you at this time. I only hope that, if you are thinking of fulfilling the legal formalities of your marriage, you will give me notice of the fact, so that I may come back, if I can. You know that all that concerns you concerns my life."

Veronica looked at him, and wondered why he was so much disturbed. But his words gave her an opportunity of speaking to him about her own decision. She did not wish him to think her capricious, much less to imagine that she looked upon the marriage as a mere piece of sentiment, which was not to change her life at all, except to bind her as a nurse to the bedside of a hopeless invalid. That idea itself was beginning to be repugnant to her, and the hope that Gianluca might recover was becoming a necessary part of her happiness, though she scarcely knew it.

"My dear Don Teodoro," she said, "so far as that is concerned, you may be quite sure that I will let you know in time. I have not the slightest intention of fulfilling any legal formalities until my husband is well enough to stand on his feet with me before the syndic; and I am afraid that he will not be well enough for that in less than a month, at the earliest."

The wandering eyes suddenly fixed themselves on her face, the strange great features relaxed, and the wide, thin lips smiled at her. His happiness was strangely founded, but it was genuine, though not altogether noble. Her words were a reprieve; and he could keep his secret longer, almost, perhaps, until he died, and when he should be dying, it would be easier to tell. But that was far from being all. He loved her, as the source of great charity and kindness from which the people were drawing life, with all his own passionate charity; and he loved her for herself, for her gentleness and her hardness, because she ruled him, and because she touched his heart. All other thoughts away, he could not bear to think of her as bound for life to be the actual wife of a helpless cripple.

And something of her own heart he half guessed and half knew. For in her innocence she had confessed to him how she had thought of Taquisara, when she had been alone that day, and how the blood had flowed in her face, and burned her so

that she was almost sure that such thoughts must be wrong. It was because she had told him these things that he had watched Taquisara ever since, and he had seen that the man loved her silently.

But he knew also, as well as any one could know it, that Gianluca would never stand upon his feet again. And, moreover, he knew that though it would seem wrong to Veronica to love Taquisara, and would be wrong, if she had intention, as it were, yet there could be no real sin in it, for she was not Gianluca's wife. Had she been truly married, Don Teodoro, gentle and old, would have found strength to force Taquisara to go away — had anything more than the force of honour been needed in such a case.

"I am very glad, my dear Princess," he said, and his voice trembled in the reaction after his own anxiety. "You do not wish me to go to Naples, now?" he said with an interrogation, after a brief pause. "You would rather that I should wait until Christmas?"

"Of course — if you can," answered Veronica, somewhat surprised at his change of tone. "But if you really must go, if you are so very anxious to go at once, I must not hinder you."

"I will see," said Don Teodoro. "I will think of it. Perhaps it can be arranged — indeed, I think it can."

He was old, she thought, and he had never been

decided in character, except about doing good to poor people, and studying Church history. So she did not press him with questions, but let him do as he would; and he did not go to Naples then, but he went and found Taquisara within the hour, and told him what Veronica had said about her marriage.

The Sicilian heard him in silence, as they stood together on the lower bastion where they had met, but Don Teodoro saw the high-cut nostrils quiver, while the even lips set themselves to betray nothing.

"If matters go no further than they have gone," he said at last, as the priest waited, "we need do nothing."

So they did nothing, and Don Teodoro did not go to Naples.

The daily life ran on in its channel. But Gianluca did not continue to improve so fast. Then it seemed as though improvement had reached its limit, and still he was helpless to stand, being completely and hopelessly paralyzed in his lower limbs. At first, neither the old couple nor Veronica realized that he was no longer getting better, though he was no worse. He himself did not believe it; but Taquisara saw and understood. Gianluca refused to be moved, insisting that he was gaining strength, and that some day the sensation would come suddenly to his feet, and he should stand upright. Otherwise, he was now almost as well as when he had come to Muro. They sent for a wheel-chair

from Naples, and he wheeled himself through the endless rooms, and to luncheon, and to dinner, Veronica walking by his side. It gave his arms exercise, and he became very expert at it, laughing cheerfully as he made the wheels go round, and he went so fast that Veronica sometimes had to run a few steps to keep up with him.

Then, one day, Taquisara carried him out to the gate, and set him in the carriage, and Veronica took him for a short drive. The poor people were, most of them, at their work, but the very old men and the boys and girls turned out, and flocked after the victoria as it moved slowly through the narrow street. Some of them called out words of simple blessing on the couple, but others hushed them and said that the princess was not really married yet. Gianluca smiled as he looked into Veronica's face, and she smiled, too, but less happily.

The weather changed. There had been a short touch of cold in the air at the end of August, and breezes from the north that poured down from the heights behind the castle, into the tremendous abyss below, and shot up again to the walls and the windows, even as high as the dungeon tower. Then, at the new moon, the weather had changed, the sky grew warm again, the little clouds hung high and motionless above the peaks, melting from day to day to a serene, deep calm, in which all the earth seemed to be ripening in a great stillness while heaven held

its breath, and the mountains slept. In the rich valley the grapes grew full and dark, and the last figs cracked with full sweetness in the sun, the pears grew golden, and the apples red, and all the green silver of the olive groves was dotted through and through its shade, with myriad millions of dull green points, where the oil-fruit hung by little stems beneath the leaves.

An autumn began, such as no one in Muro remembered — an autumn of golden days and dewy moonlight nights, soft, breathless, sweet, and tender. It was a year of plenty and of much good wine, which is rare in the south, for when the wine is much it is very seldom good. But this year all prospered, and the people said that the Blessed Mother of God loved the young princess and would bless her, and hers also, and give her husband back his strength, even by a miracle if need should be.

Gianluca clung to the place where he was happy, and would not be taken away. His mother humoured him, and the old Duca, yearning for his little fair-haired daughter, went alone at last to Avellino.

Then came long conversations at night between the Duchessa and Veronica. The Duchessa loved her son very dearly, but since he was so much better, she was tired of Muro. She wished to see her other children. It was ridiculous to expect that she and her husband should relieve each other

as sentries of propriety in Veronica's castle, the one not daring to go till the other came back. Why should Veronica not send for the syndic and have the formalities fulfilled? Once legally, as well as christianly, man and wife, the two could stay in Muro as long as they pleased.

But Veronica would not. Gianluca was improving, and before long he would walk. She had set her heart upon it, that he should be strong again. She would not have her people think that he was a cripple. The people were peasants, the Duchessa answered, peasants like any others. Why should the Princess of Acireale care what such creatures thought? But Veronica's eyes gleamed, and she said that they were her own people and a part of her life, and she told the Duchessa all that was in her mind, very frankly, and so innocently, yet with such unbending determination to have her way, that the Duchessa did not know what to do. Thereupon, after the manner of futile people, she repeated herself, and the struggle began again.

It was a tragedy that had begun. Veronica had escaped with her life from Matilde Macomer to find out in the consequence of her own free deeds what tragedy really meant, and how bitter the fruit of good could be.

Nor in the slightest degree had her affection for Gianluca diminished, nor did it change in itself, as days followed days to full weeks, and week choked

week, cramming whole months back into time's sack, for time to bear away and cast into the abyss of the useless and irrevocable past.

Still he was her friend, still she would give her life to save him, and would have given it again if it had been to give. Still she could talk with him, and listen to him, and answer smile and word and gesture. She could sit beside him through quiet hours, and drive with him in the vast, still sunshine of that golden autumn, calling him by gentler names than friend and touching his hand softly in the long silence. All this she could do, and if there were ever any effort in it, that was surely not an effort to be kind, but one of those little doubting, uncertain, spontaneous efforts which we make whenever we unconsciously begin to feel that it will not be enough to do right, but that we must also seem to do right in other eyes, lest our right be thought half hearted.

The days were monotonous, but it was not their monotony which she felt, so much as that irrevocable quality of them all which made a grey background in her soul, against which something was moving, undefined, strong as the unseen wind, yet mistily visible sometimes, having more life than shape — a terrible thing which drew her to it against her will, and yet a thing which had in it much besides terror.

She turned from it when she knew that it was

there, and fixed her sight upon Gianluca's face. Sometimes she found comfort in that, and she did all that was required of her, and more also, and was glad to do it.

But the wrong done to nature was deeper and more real than all the good she could do to hide it, and it cried out against her continually by the voice of the woman's instinct. It was not Gianluca who became intolerable to her, but she herself, and it was to escape from herself that she clung to him closely, as well as out of affection for him; for when she was by herself she was no longer alone. That other unshaped something kept her company.

She was bound hand and foot, soul, body, and intelligence, for life. She, the very strong, was tied to the helpless; she, the energetic, was bound to apathy; she, the active, was nailed to the passive; she, the free, the erect, was bowed under a burden which she must carry to her life's end, never to be free again.

She could bear the burden, and she said none of these things to herself. But the wrong was upon nature, and the mother of all turned against the one child that would be unlike all the rest.

The man who was a man, soul and body, heart, hand, and spirit, stood beside the other, who was a shadow, and beside her, who was a woman — and the tragedy began in the prologue of contrast.

Strength to weakness, motion to immobility, the grace and carriage of manly youth to the sad restfulness of helpless, hopeless limbs that never again could feel and bear weight; that was the contrast from which there was no escaping. On the steps of love's temple, at the very threshold, the one lay half dead, never to rise again; and beside him stood the other, in the pride and glory of the morning of life.

It would have been hard, even if the contrast had been less strong to the eye, and the distance of the two souls greater one from the other — even if Taquisara had not been what he was. But as the one, in his being, was alive from head to heel, so the other was dead save in the thoughts in which he still had a shadowy life. And for the rest — flesh, blood, and life apart — they were equals. Was Gianluca true? Taquisara was as honest and loyal as the brave daylight. Was the one brave? So was the other, in thought and deed. Was Gianluca enduring? So was Taquisara, and he had the more to endure, the more to fight, the more to keep down in him.

She knew that he loved her. How it was that she knew it she could not tell, but sometimes the music of the truth rang in her ears till the flame shot up in her face and she shut her eyes to hide her soul — a loud, triumphant music, stately and grand as might herald the marching of archangels

—till her inward cry of terror pierced it, and all was as still as the grave. Then, for a space, the vision of sin stood dark in the way, and she turned and fled from it back to Gianluca's side, back to the care of him, back to his helpless love for her, back to his pathetic, stricken restfulness, back to the maiden dreams of a life-long friendship, unbroken as the calm of the summer ocean, perfect as the cloudless sky of those golden autumn days.

For a time, the dark wraith of sin faded, and there was no music in the air, and her cheek was cool, while she looked all the world in the face with the fearless eyes of a child-empress. Again the monotonous, good day rolled in the same grooves, noiselessly, and surely, as all the days to come were to roll along, to the end of ends. She worked for her people, talked with Don Teodoro, talked, smiled, laughed with Gianluca, and bore the old Duchessa's ramblings with patience and kindness.

But all of a sudden, for a nothing, at the sight of a fencing foil, at the smell of Gianluca's cigarette, at the sound of a footfall she knew, there came the mad wish to be alone; and she resisted it, for it did not seem good to her, and even as she struggled the blood rose in her throat and was in her cheeks in a moment, so that if just then by chance Taquisara came upon her suddenly, the room swam and for an instant her brain reeled as she turned her face from him in mortal shame.

She knew so well that he loved her, and that he was suffering, too. It was love's hands that had chiselled the bronze of his face to leaner lines, and that threw a new darkness into his dark eyes. It was for her that there was that other note in his voice that had never been there before. It was for love of her that once or twice, when she took his hand in greeting, it was icy cold — not like Gianluca's, half dead, and dull, and chilly, and very thin — but cold from the heart, as it were, and more wildly living than if it had burned like fire; trembling, and not in weakness, with something that caught her own fingers and ran like lightning to the very core and quick of her soul, hurting it overmuch with its bolt of joy and fear. It was for her that, at the first, he had been cold and silent, because he was afraid of himself, and of love, and of the least, faintest breath that might tarnish the bright shield of his spotless loyalty to Gianluca.

All the little changes in his speech and manner were clear to her now, and each had its meaning, and all meant the same. His words, spoken from time to time, came back to her, and she understood them, and saw how, for his friend's sake, he had held his peace for himself, and had ever urged her to marry Gianluca, in spite of everything.

If he had not loved her, or if she had thought that he did not, she would have had the pride to tear her heart clean from love's terrible hands,

whole or broken, as might be, and to toss it, with the dead dull weeks into old time's sack of irrevocably lost and useless things, and so to live her life out, loveless, in the still haven of Gianluca's friendship. But, having his love, she had not such pride; and the loyalty she truly had was matched alone against all human nature since the world began.

Do what she would, she yielded sometimes to that great wish to go suddenly to her own room and be alone. Then, standing at her window when the mist whitened in the valley under the broad moon, she listened, and instantly the air was full of music again as love lifted up its voice, and sweetly chanted the melody of life. With parted lips she listened, till the moonlight filled her eyes, and her heart fluttered softly, and her throat was warm.

And sometimes, too, while she was there, the man who loved her so silently and so well was by his friend's side, tending as his own the life that stood between him and the hope of happiness; loving both him and her, but honour best. But sometimes he, too, was alone in his own room, and even at his window, facing the same broad moon, the same white mist in the sleeping valley, the same dark, crested hills, but not hearing the music that the woman heard. He could be calm for a while as he looked out; but presently, without warning, he swallowed hard, and again, as on the fatal day, he held her little hand in his, under the priest's

great sign of the cross, and his own blood shrieked in his ears. In cruel anger against himself, he turned from the window then and paced the room with short, braced steps, till at last he threw himself into a deep chair and sullenly took the first book at hand, to read himself back to the monotony of all he had to bear.

And so those two fearless ones went through the days and weeks in twofold terror of themselves and each of the other, and the slow, wordless tragedy was acted before eyes that saw but did not understand. Still Gianluca refused to go away, and still Veronica refused to send for the syndic. She would not yield to the Duchessa, who found herself opposed both by her son and her son's wife.

No one knew how much Veronica herself still hoped, when the bright autumn days were broken at last by the first winter storm that rose out of the dark south in monstrous wrath against such perpetual calm. She herself did not know whether she still hoped for any improvement, or whether, in her inmost thoughts, she had given up hope and had accepted the certainty that Gianluca was never to be better than he was now. There is something of habit in all hope that has been with us long, and the habits we notice the least are sometimes the hardest of all to break.

When Veronica said that Gianluca would yet stand up and walk, no one contradicted her, except

the doctors, and she had no faith in them. They came and went. The great professor came three times from Naples and saw the patient, ate his dinner, slept soundly, and went away assuring Veronica that it was useless to send for him unless some great change took place. To please her, he recommended a little electricity, baths, light treatment such as could give little trouble, and he carefully instructed the young doctor of Muro in all he was to do. When he had finished, and the young man had promised to do everything regularly, they looked at each other, smiled sadly, but professionally, and parted with mutual good will and understanding, both knowing that the case was now perfectly hopeless. Their coming and going made little intervals in the tragic play of life, but never broke its continuity.

The old Duca appeared again, and slipped quietly into his place, as before. But at the end of a week there was an unexpected flaring-up of energy, as it were, in his docile and affectionate being. When he and his wife and Veronica were with Gianluca, he suddenly declared that the situation must end, and that they must all go down to Naples. Veronica should send for the syndic, and have the legal marriage at once, and then they would all go down together. It was quite clear in his mind, as simple as daylight, as easy of performance as breathing, as satisfactory as satisfaction

itself. The Duchessa was with him, and supported all he said with approving nods and futile gestures and incoherent phrases thrown in, as one throws straws upon a stream to see the current carry them away.

Gianluca said nothing, and Veronica stood alone against them all, for she knew that he was on his father's side. She guessed, perhaps, that Gianluca had made up his mind never to leave her roof except as her lawful husband, clinging to her, as he had tried to cling to her skirt on that most eventful day when she had gone to the window for a moment; and she understood why, having spoken once, he would not speak again. He was too proud to repeat such a request, but his love was far too obstinate to be satisfied with less than its fulfilment. But his own hope for his recovery was more alive than hers.

Instinctively, as she opposed them all, Veronica looked round for Taquisara. It was not often that she needed help, and she knew that he could have helped her, had he been there. But she had to speak for herself. She said what she could; but in that self-examination which self-defence forces upon those who have never dissected their own hearts, a new and fearful truth sprang up, clear of all others, bright, keen, and terrible.

It was no longer for her people's sake that she was waiting in the hope of Gianluca's recovery.

It was no longer for her own, nor for his. It was out of her deadly love for Taquisara that all her nature rose against that final bond of the law, and the world, and society. So long as that was not yet welded and made fast upon her, there was the fleeting shadow of a desperate hope that she might still be free.

It rose and smote her between the eyes, and clutched at her heart; and when she knew its face, she stopped in the midst of her speech, and turned white, even to her lips and her throat.

"I do not know. I will think about it," she said faintly.

As her power to oppose gave way, the Duca's astonishment at his victory swelled his weakness to violence; and he raved of duties and obligations, of paternal authority, of the obedience of children and children-in-law, in all the boundless, self-assured incoherence of feebleness suddenly let loose against smitten strength.

Veronica seemed to hear nothing. She had resumed her seat beside Gianluca, and was stroking his white hand, — less thin than it had been, but somehow even more lifeless, — and she looked down at it very thoughtfully, while he watched her face. He was happier than he had been for a long time, for he knew that she was going to make a concession, and that he had not asked for it.

There was silence, and Veronica raised her head.

The old Duca's face was red with the exertion of much speaking. He was a good man and meant well, but in that moment Veronica hated him as she had never hated any one, not even Matilde Macomer. And yet she knew that his intention was all for the best, and that it was natural that he should press his point and exult when she gave up the fight. She opened her lips to speak.

At that moment the door turned on its hinges opposite her eyes, and Taquisara stood before her. He came in quietly and not knowing that anything extraordinary was occurring. But his eyes met hers for one moment, and instantly her cheek reddened in the evening light.

"I will give you a promise," she said slowly. "This is the first week in December. If Gianluca is not much better by the first of January, I will do as you ask. The civil marriage shall take place here, and if he wishes to go down to Naples, we will all go together."

The Duca began to speak again, sure that he could press her further. But she interrupted him. Taquisara had gone to the window and was turning his back on them all.

"No," said Veronica. "That is what I will do, and I will do it — I have promised — that, and nothing else."

She had risen, and as she pronounced the last words, she left Gianluca's side and, with her eyes

fixed before her, went straight to the door, pale and erect. She felt that she had given her life a second time. Taquisara heard her footsteps, left the window, and opened the door for her to pass, standing aside while she went by. He saw her head move a little, as though she would turn and look at him, and he saw how resolutely she resisted and looked before her. He understood that she would not trust herself to see his eyes again, and he quietly closed the door behind her. She knew what he must have felt when she had spoken, and he felt a lofty pride that she should trust him to bear the knife without warning, sure that he would utter no cry.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The tenth of December was at hand, on which day Don Teodoro had been in the habit of going to Naples to pay his annual visit to his friend Don Matteo. When Taquisara told him of what had taken place, the priest knew that he need not disturb Veronica for permission to leave Muro, merely for the sake of gaining a day or two. One day was all he needed, and there would be three weeks from the tenth of December to the first of January. He made his preparations for the little journey with much care, and went away with more luggage than usual. He also set all his manuscripts and books in order. When he was going away he gave the key of his little house to Taquisara.

"I do not expect to come back," he said. "But you will hear from me. It will be kind of you to have my books and manuscripts sent to an address which I will give you in my letter. I do not think that we shall meet again. Good-bye. If I were not what I am, I would bless you. Good-bye."

Taquisara held his hand for a moment.

"We shall all bless you," he answered, "if you can end this trouble."

"I can," said the priest. "And your blessing is worth having."

He went away quickly, as though not trusting himself to speak any more. He had taken leave of Veronica and the rest as hastily as he could without giving offence to any one. It was not until he looked back at the poor people who waved their hands at him as he went out of the village that the hot tears streamed down his cheeks.

He was twenty-four hours in reaching Naples, as usual, and his friend greeted him with open arms as he always did. He thought that Don Teodoro looked ill and tired, and as it was a fine day they walked the short distance from Don Matteo's house to the café where the priest had sat with Bosio, and they each drank a cup of chocolate.

Don Matteo observed that the tenth of December had been a fine day in the preceding year, too, and Don Teodoro tried to remember in what year it had last rained on that date. They ate little puffed bits of pastry with their chocolate, and they sat a long time over it, while Don Matteo told Don Teodoro of an interesting document of the fourteenth century which he had discovered in a private library. Don Teodoro spoke rarely, but not at random, for the thinking habit of the scholarly mind does not easily break down, even under a great strain.

Then they went back to Don Matteo's house, and sat down together in the study. Don Matteo wondered why his friend did not unpack and arrange his belongings, especially as he had brought more luggage than usual with him, but he saw that he was tired, and said nothing. Don Teodoro took off his spectacles, and rubbed them bright with the corner of his mantle. He looked at them and took a long time over polishing them, for he was thinking of all the things he had seen through the old silver-rimmed glasses, some of which he should never see again.

"My friend," he said at last, "I wish to tell you a secret."

Don Matteo turned slowly in his seat, uncrossed his knees, and looked at him.

"You may trust me," he answered.

"I know that," said Don Teodoro. "But there are reasons, as you will see, why you cannot receive this as an ordinary secret. I wish to tell it to you as a confession. You will then have to consult the archbishop, before giving me absolution — and advice."

"Is it as serious as that?" asked Don Matteo, very much surprised, for only the very gravest matters, and generally the most terrible crimes, are referred to the bishop by a confessor.

"It is a grave matter," answered Don Teodoro. "Have the kindness to get your stole, and I will

make my confession here. But we will lock the outer door of the outer room, if you please."

He was shivering, and his face was white as he rose to go and slip the bolt. Re-entering the room, he locked the inner door also behind him. Don Matteo had produced from a drawer an old violet stole with tarnished silver embroidery. It was carefully wrapped up in thin, clean, white paper. A priest always wears the stole in administering any of the seven sacraments. He passed it over his head, and the broad bands fell over his breast, and he held the ends, upon which were embroidered small Greek crosses, in one of his hands. Grave and silent, he sat down beside the table, resting his elbow upon it and shading his eyes with his other hand.

Don Teodoro knelt down beside him at the table, and each said his part of the preliminary form in a low voice. When Don Teodoro had said the first half of the 'Confiteor,' he was silent for some time, and Don Matteo was aware that his tall, thin frame was trembling, for the table shook under his elbow. Then he began to speak, as follows: —

"I must tell the story of my life. My father was an officer in the army of King Ferdinand, under the former government, and I was his only child. He had a little fortune, and his pay was relatively large for those days, so that I was brought up as a gentleman's son. My father, who

had been so fortunate as to make many advantageous friendships in the course of his career, wished me to enter the military academy and the army. By his interest I should have had rapid advancement. But this was not my inclination. Ever since I can remember anything, I know that I ardently wished to be a priest. As a little boy, I used to make a small altar in a dark room behind my own, and I used to adorn it and dress it for the feast days, and light tapers on it, and save my pocket money to buy tiny silver ornaments for it. Before I could read I knew the Rosary and the short Litanies, and I used to say them very devoutly before my little altar, with genuflexions and other gestures such as I saw the priests make in church. My father smiled sometimes, but he did not interfere. He was a devout man, though he was a soldier. I had some facility for learning, also, and was fond of all books. My mother died when I was four years old.

"I need not tell how the devout passion increased in me as I grew older. I passed through all the stages of such development very quickly. My father believed that I had a true vocation for the Church, and yielding to my entreaties and to the advice of his friends, who told him that he could never make a soldier of such a boy, he allowed me to enter a seminary. I was very happy, and my love of books and my earnest desire to be a priest

continued to increase. I was made a deacon and received the tonsure. Then I fell ill. It was the will of Heaven, for I never was ill before that, nor have been since. It was a long illness, a dangerous fever. Just before that time, while I was in the seminary, my father had married a second time, a young and very beautiful woman, scarcely two years older than I. They both took care of me, and she was very kind and liked me from the first.

"I loved her. That was perhaps an illness also, for I never suffered in that way again. It was very terrible, for I knew what a great sin it was to love my father's wife. I never told her that I loved her, and she was always the same, kind and good. My heart was red-hot iron in my breast, day and night, and it was very long before I was really well again. After that, I confessed my sin many times, but I could not feel repentance for it. My father wondered, and so did she, why I would not go back to the seminary for the few months that remained to complete my studies. It would have been better if I had gone back. But I loved her, and I could not. I could not confess the sin in my heart to the confessor of the seminary, for whom I had great esteem and who had known me so long. I was ashamed, and waited, thinking that it would pass. But I wished to escape.

"I joined myself as a lay brother to a Franciscan

mission that was going to Africa. My father made many objections to this, but I overcame them. I think he guessed that I loved his wife, and though he loved me, too, he was glad that I should go away. As for me, I trusted that in the labours of a distant mission I should forget my love, feel honest repentance, receive absolution, and be ordained a true priest by a missionary bishop.

"We were seven who started together upon that mission. After two years I alone was left alive. One after the other they died of the fever of that country. We had written for help, but I knew afterwards that our letters had not reached the sea. That was why no one came to bring help. We had converted people amongst those savages and had built a chapel. Even those who were not converted were friendly, for we had taught them many things. My companions all died, one by one, and I buried the last. But I myself was never ill of the fever. Yet the people there clung around me. I committed a great sin. They had no priest, and they did not understand that I was not one, for I dressed like the others. If there were no more services in the little chapel, they would think that Christianity was dead, and they would fall back to their former condition. I took the sin upon myself, and I said mass for them, knowing that it was no mass, and praying that God would forgive me, and that it might not be a sacrilege. I did

not fall ill. I lived amongst them, and received their confessions and administered all the sacraments when they were required, for the space of a year and a half, during which I sent many appeals for help. But in my letters I did not explain what I was doing, for I intended to go to the bishop if I ever got home alive, and confess to him.

"At last help came, priests and lay brothers. It pleased Heaven that they should come at last at the very moment when I was saying mass for the people. Of course there was no bishop amongst them, and none of them knew that I was not a priest. I should have confessed the truth to the eldest of them, but I had no courage, for I did not do it at once, but put it off, and as every priest said mass every day, I said mine, too, on the first morning after the others had come. I wished to go away at once. But I alone knew all the people, and could preach a little in their language, and I was much loved by them, for I had been alone with them during eighteen months. So my new brethren would not let me go, and after what I had done so far, I was ashamed to tell the truth about myself. They looked up to me as a superior, because I had been so long in the mission and had lived through what had killed so many. They thought me very humble and praised my humility. But it was not humility — it was shame.

"During two years more I remained with them,

and two of them died, but the rest lived, for I had learned how men should live in that country in order to escape the fevers, and I taught them. The mission grew, and many people were converted. Then they began to speak of sending home two of their number to Rome, to give an account of the work, and to get more help, if possible, in order that the conversion might be carried further into the country; and they decided to do so. It was my right to be one of the two, and I took it. My companion was a young priest less strong than the rest, and we left the mission and after a long journey we got home safely. I meant to go to the first bishop I met, and make my confession.

"But when we came to Rome and we were giving an account of what had been done, the young priest thrust me forward to speak, as was natural, and I seemed to be a personage of importance, because I had lived through so many perils and had outlived so many. We two were invited to dinner by cardinals, and were admitted to a private audience of the Pope. Everybody seemed to know what I had done, and even the liberal newspapers praised my courage and devotion.

"I had no courage, for being full of vanity, I never confessed my sin. But I would not go back to the mission, and when I could leave Rome, I left the young priests there and went to Naples

to see my father. He had read what had been written about me, and was proud of me, and he received me gladly, for he loved me and was a devout man. Six years had passed since I had seen his wife, and though I trembled when I was just about to see her, yet when she entered the room I knew that I did not love her any more, and I was very much pleased to find that this sin, at least, had left me.

"I lived with them several years, devoting myself to study, and I used to say my mass in a church close by. For I was a priest by nature and heart, and I had grown so used to my sin of sacrilege, that I shut my eyes, and told myself that it was the wish of Heaven. But the truth is, I was a coward. It was then that you first knew me and you know how my father died and my stepmother married again, and how I undertook to be the tutor of poor Bosio Macomer. But with years, the city grew distasteful to me, and I wished to be alone, for Bosio was grown up, and I had no heart for teaching any one else. I was also very poor, having spent what my father left me, both on books, and in other ways of which I need not speak because there was nothing wrong in what I did with the money.

"And then, Count Macomer — the one who is now insane — offered to make me curate of Muro and chaplain of the castle of the Serra, all of which

you know. And I, accustomed to my wickedness, and feeling myself a priest, though I was not one, accepted it for the peace of it.

"It is a very terrible thing. For all the sacraments I have administered in these many years have been of no value; but the worst, for its consequences, is that none of the many hundreds I have married, are truly married, and that if the truth were known to them, the confusion would be beyond my power to imagine. But Christians they are, for a layman may baptize, even though he be not in a state of grace.

"And for the other sacraments, the sin is all mine, as you see, and God will be good to them all, according to the intention and belief they had. And now a worse thing has happened, though it was not my fault, excepting that the original fault is all mine. For Don Gianluca della Spina was lying at the point of death, and there were with him the princess and Don Sigismondo Taquisara, the Baron of Guardia, his friend. The princess desired to be married to Don Gianluca, before he died, and sent for me in great haste and commanded me to marry them. As I raised my eyes to speak, for it was impossible to resist her will, the Taquisara thought that Don Gianluca was dead and took the princess's hand from the dead man's, as he thought, and as I suppose — and I gave them the benediction. But when I looked down, it was

the Baron of Guardia who appeared to have been married to the princess, for their right hands were clasped; and I cannot tell whether, if I were a true priest, they would have been married or not.

"But the princess and Don Gianluca believe that I made them husband and wife, though the Taquisara knows that something was wrong, since he held her hand. For Don Gianluca has recovered, and they are now about to have a civil marriage and announce it to their friends.

"It was the will of God that my own sin should follow me to the end, and that it should be the means of freeing these three persons from their terrible position. For the Baron of Guardia believes that he is married to the princess, and she believes that she is Don Gianluca's wife. But as yet no further harm is done, and the Taquisara is the bravest gentleman and the truest man to his friend that ever drew breath. Therefore I have made this confession. And I will abide all the consequences. The bishop before whom you will lay the case will know what is to be done. It will be in his power, I presume, to acquaint the princess with the fact that she is not married at all, and must be married by a true priest; and to do so, without injuring the poor people of Muro who have been the victims of my sin for many years.

"That is my confession. And now, if I have not made all clear to you, I beg you to ask me such

questions as you think fit, for it is not in your power to give me absolution."

Don Teodoro was exhausted. His face sank upon his folded hands on the edge of the table, and his shoulders trembled.

"My poor friend! My poor friend!" repeated Don Matteo, in a low and wondering tone. "No — it is quite clear," he added. "There is nothing which I have not understood. But I can say nothing, my poor friend! Pray — pray for forgiveness. God will forgive you, for you have done evil only to yourself, and never anything but good to others."

Don Teodoro in a hardly audible voice repeated the second half of the 'Confiteor' and remained on his knees a little while longer. Don Matteo covered his eyes with his hands, and during several minutes there was silence. Then the two old men rose and looked at each other for a moment.

"Courage!" said Don Matteo, and he gently patted his friend's shoulder.

He took off his stole, folded it carefully, and wrapped it in its clean white paper again, before putting it away. But he did that by force of habit. Confessors hear strange things sometimes and are not easily disconcerted, but Don Teodoro's was the strangest tale that had ever come to Don Matteo's ears. Again he came and patted Don Teodoro's shoulder in a way of kindly encouragement.

Then he took his three-cornered hat and went

out without a word. In such a case there was no time to be lost.

Cardinal Campodonico was at that time the archbishop of Naples, and he received Don Matteo immediately, for the priest was a man of extraordinarily brilliant gifts and well known to the prelate, who liked him and had caused him to be made a canon of the cathedral not many years earlier.

Don Matteo, as was right in such a position, laid the whole matter before him as a theoretical case of conscience, without names, and without any useless details which might by any possibility give a clue to his real penitent's identity. He stated it all with great clearness and force, but he dwelt much upon the spotless life of charity and good works which the man had led, in spite of his one chief sin. He knew, when Don Teodoro spoke of having spent his father's fortune, that almost every penny of it had gone to the poor of Naples in one way or another, and he had seen at a glance how his poor friend had in his youth exaggerated his boyish admiration for his stepmother. But Don Matteo put the main point very clearly before the cardinal — always as a purely theoretical case of conscience, asking what a confessor's duty would be in such an extremely difficult situation.

The cardinal listened attentively, and then was silent for some time.

"The first thing to be done," he said at last, "would be to make a priest of him. He is evidently a man with a vocation, and the chain of circumstances which led him into this sin and difficulty is a very strange one. I hardly know what to say of it — left alone with savages only just converted — well, he was wrong, of course. But the man you represent in your theoretical case is supposed to be in all other respects almost a holy man."

"Yes, a man of holy life," said Don Matteo, earnestly.

"I do not see how a man of such disposition could have been so lacking in courage afterwards," said the cardinal.

"But suppose that it were exactly as I represent the case, Eminence, what should the confessor do?"

The cardinal looked into his eyes long and gravely.

"I should think it best to make a priest of him as soon as possible," he said at last.

"But how? No bishop could ordain him a priest without knowing his story."

"I would ordain him, if he came to me. I think I should be doing right."

"But then your Eminence would know him, and the secret of confession would have been betrayed."

"That is true. Let him go to another bishop and tell his story."

"Another bishop might not think as your Eminence does. Besides, the question is what the confessor is to do under the circumstances."

The cardinal suddenly rose, went to the broad window, and looked out thoughtfully. Don Matteo stood up respectfully, waiting. It seemed to him a long time before the prelate turned, and what he did then surprised the priest very much, for he went to each of the three doors of the room in succession, opened it, looked out, closed it again and locked it. Then he came back to Don Matteo.

"Are you, to the best of your belief, in a state of grace, my friend?" he asked in a low voice. "Have you no mortal sin on your conscience? Reflect well. This is a grave matter."

"I cannot think of any, Eminence," answered the good priest, after a moment's pause.

"Very well. We are alone here. The case of conscience you have laid before me is a very extraordinary one. I do not wish to know whether it has actually come before you in confession. But if it has, — or if it should, — I should wish you to be in a position to help that poor man and set his life straight, by the grace of God, without injuring him, and, above all, without injuring any of those persons to whom he has administered the sacraments. I have known you a long time, Don

Matteo, and I can trust you to make no use of any power I give you, before the world. I have the power and the right to consecrate a bishop any priest whom I think a fit person. Kneel down here, say the 'Confiteor,' and I will lay my hands on you. You could then give the penitent absolution and ordain him a priest privately."

Don Matteo started in utmost surprise, and hesitated an instant.

"Kneel down," said the cardinal. "I take this upon myself."

The priest knelt, and the solemn words sounded low in the quiet little room, as the archbishop laid his hands upon Don Matteo's grey head. When the latter rose, he kissed the cardinal's ring, trembling a little, for it had all been very unexpected. The cardinal embraced him in the ecclesiastical fashion, and then, to his further amazement, drew off his episcopal ring and slipped it upon Don Matteo's finger, took his own bishop's cross and chain from his neck and hung it about Don Matteo's neck.

"Keep them both in memory of this morning," said the prelate. "But hide the chain and the cross under your cassock, for people need not see that you are a bishop, when you sit among the canons in church. You know it, I know it, your penitent must know it if the case is a real one, and the Pope shall know it — but no one else living need ever

guess it. Will you kindly unlock the doors? Thank you. We will not mention this occurrence again, if we can help it. Good morning, Don Matteo — good morning, my friend."

When Don Matteo was in the street again, he stood still and passed his hand over his eyes, trying to collect his thoughts. His bishop's ring touched his forehead, and he realized that it was all true. He had not been half an hour in the archbishop's palace, and when he reached his own door, he had not been absent an hour from the house.

He found Don Teodoro in the same room and still in the same chair, into which he had dropped exhausted when Don Matteo had gone out, his head sunk on his breast, his hands clasped despairingly on his knees. As the door opened, he looked up with scared eyes, and rose.

"Courage!" exclaimed Don Matteo, patting his shoulder just as he had done before going out. "I have seen his Eminence."

Don Teodoro looked at him in mute and resigned expectation, and wondered at his cheerful face. But his friend made him sit down again, and told him all that had taken place, and then, before Don Teodoro could recover his astonishment and emotion, he found himself kneeling on the floor and heard the words of absolution spoken softly over him. A moment later he felt upon his head the laying of hands and heard those still more solemn

words pronounced over him, which he had never hoped to hear said for himself.

When he rose to his feet at last, he saw Don Matteo wrapping up the bishop's cross and chain and ring in the same piece of clean white paper in which he kept the old stole.

But Don Teodoro went to his little room, which was ready for him as usual, and he was not seen again on that day. Several times Don Matteo went softly to the door. Once he heard the old man sobbing within as though his heart would break, all alone; and once again he heard his voice saying Latin prayers in a low tone; and the third time all was very still, and Don Matteo knew that the worst was past.

On the next morning very early Don Teodoro came out of his room. Neither of the two spoke of what had happened, but the clear light was in the old priest's eyes again, clearer and happier than before, and little by little the lines smoothed themselves from his singular face until there were no more there than there had been for years. All that day they talked together of books and of Don Teodoro's great history of the Church. But they were both thoughtful and subject to moments of absence of mind.

It was not until the evening of the third day that Don Teodoro asked his friend a question.

"What do you advise me to say to the prin-

cess?" he inquired, when they were alone together.

"Tell her that you have consulted an ecclesiastical authority and that there was an irregularity about the marriage with Don Gianluca so that you must solemnly marry them again before they can consider themselves man and wife. And tell the Baron of Guardia that the same authority is sure that he was not married to the princess, but is a free man. It is very simple, and there can be no possible mistake, now."

"Yes," said Don Teodoro. "It is very simple."

And so it was, for Cardinal Campodonico deserved the reputation he enjoyed of being, in ecclesiastical affairs, a man equal to the most difficult emergencies, in character, in keen discernment, and in prompt action.

But Don Teodoro sighed softly when he had spoken, for he thought of Taquisara and of what that brave and silent man would suffer when he was forced to stand by Gianluca's side and see the rings exchanged and the hands joined, and hear the words spoken which must cut him off forever from all hope. But Taquisara, at least, in his suffering, would have the consolation of having been honest and true and loyal from first to last. He would never have to bear the consequences of having been a coward at a great moment. It could not be so very hard for him, after all, thought Don Teodoro.

And he saw no reason for curtailing his stay in Naples, since there was time until the first of January. On the contrary, he grew glad of those long days, in which he could meditate on the past and think of the future, and be supremely and humbly thankful for the great change that had come into his life.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Don Teodoro wrote a few words to Taquisara, embodying what Don Matteo had advised him to say. He added also that matters had not turned out as he had expected and that he should return to Muro as usual on the twentieth of the month. The Sicilian read the letter twice and then burned it carefully. He was neither surprised nor disappointed by its contents, though he had expected that there would be much more difficulty in undoing what had been done. There was clearly nothing more to be said, as there was most certainly nothing more to hope. Don Teodoro had undoubtedly consulted the archbishop of Naples, thought Taquisara, and such a decision was final and authoritative.

He had succeeded in forcing himself into a sort of mechanical regularity of life which helped him through the day. Gianluca needed him still, though less than formerly, and as long as he could be of use, and could control his face and voice, he would stay in Muro. Since Veronica had fixed the first of January as a limit, he could hardly find an excuse for going away during the last

three weeks of the time, when he could still be of infinite service to his friend on the journey to Naples.

On the whole, he considered himself very little. It was easier to do his utmost, and to invent more than his utmost to be done, than it would be to live an idle life anywhere else.

Again, as in the early days, he avoided Veronica when he could do so, without attracting Gianluca's attention, and Veronica herself kept out of his way as much as she could. Without words they had a tacit understanding that they would never be left alone together, even for an instant.

One day, by chance, going in opposite directions through the house, they opened opposite doors of the same room and faced each other unexpectedly. For a single instant both paused, and then came forward to pass each other. Veronica held her head high and looked straight before her, for they had met already on that day, and there was no reason why she should speak to him. But Taquisara could not help looking into her face, and he saw how hard it tried to be and yet how, in spite of herself, it softened almost before she had passed him. He turned and glanced at her retreating figure, and her head was bent low, and her right hand, hanging by her side, opened and shut twice convulsively, in his sight.

He had not dared to suggest to himself until

then that she might possibly love him, but in the flash of that quick passing he almost knew it. Then, before he had closed the door behind him and entered the next room, the knowledge was gone, and he cursed himself for the thought, as though it had been an insult to her. If he should have to pass her alone again, he would rather cut off his right hand than turn and look at her. But that one moment, past and gone, had life in it to torment him night and day.

Gianluca was no better, and no worse. He wheeled himself about the great rooms, and on fine mornings Veronica took him to drive. She read to him, played bésique with him, fenced with Taquisara to amuse him; she devoted herself to him in every way; but as day followed day, she invented all sorts of occupations and games which should take the place of conversation. Anything was better than talking with him, now; anything was better than to hear him say that he loved her, expecting her to pronounce the words.

He himself lost heart suddenly.

"I shall never walk again," he said, one afternoon, as they sat together in the big room.

The days were very short, for it was mid-December, and the lamps had been brought. They had been out in the carriage, and when Taquisara had lifted him from his seat, he had made a desperate attempt to move his legs, a sud-

den effort into which he had thrown all the concentrated hope and will that were still in him. But there had been neither motion nor sensation, and all at once he had felt that it was all over, forever.

Veronica looked at him quickly, and he was watching her face. He saw no contradiction there of what he had said, but only a little surprise that he should have said it.

"You may not be able to walk as soon as we thought," she answered gently. "But that is no reason why you should never walk at all."

"I am afraid it is," he said.

She stroked his hand, as she often did, and her eyes wandered from his face to the other side of the room, and back again.

"I have been trying very hard to get well," he continued presently. "Harder than any one knows."

"I know," Veronica answered. "You are so brave!"

"Brave? No. I am desperate. Do you think I do not know what it must be to you, to be tied to a hopeless cripple like me?"

"Tied? I?" She spoke bravely, for it would have been a deadly cruelty not to contradict him. "It is for you," she went on. "You must not think of me as tied to you, dear, as you call it! I did it gladly, of my own free will, and I knew what I was doing."

"Ah no!" he answered sadly. "You could not have known what you were doing, then. Your whole life has only saved half of mine."

A chill of fear shot through Veronica's heart.

"Dear," she said anxiously and nervously. "Have I done anything to make you talk like this?"

"Yes, love, you have done much," he answered, with a tender, regretful look. "No — do not start! I am sorry that you did not understand. It is because you do so much, because you give your whole life for my wretched existence, because I know what my hours of happiness cost you now and will cost you hereafter. That is why I say these things. It would have been so much easier and simpler if I had died with my hand in yours, that day, when Don Teodoro married us. Veronica — tell me — did he say all the words? I fainted, I think."

"Yes," answered Veronica, still pale. "He said all the words."

"And did he give us the benediction?"

"Yes, he gave us the benediction."

Gianluca sighed.

"Then it cannot be undone, dear," he said softly. "You must forgive me."

"I would not have it undone, Gianluca."

And before that great unselfishness, Veronica bowed her head down, until her lips kissed his

hands. But as she touched them, she heard the door open, and instantly she was erect again, and trying to smile. Taquisara came in.

Veronica rose, for she felt that she could not sit still by Gianluca's side, with his words in her ear, her own scarcely cold upon her lips, and the man for whom she would have given her soul's salvation, who would have died ten deaths for her, standing quietly there, looking on. She walked nervously up and down the room.

"Should you like to fence?" asked Taquisara. "We have not touched a foil to-day."

Anything seemed good which could pass the time without talking. But to her it seemed heartless just then.

"No," she answered, almost curtly. "It seems to me that we are always fencing."

But Gianluca understood why she refused. And to him, perhaps, anything was better than thinking.

"Please do!" he said. "I enjoy it so much!"

Mechanically and without a word, she went to the corner where the foils and other things were kept in a great carved chest.

Taquisara moved a large table out of the way, pushing it slowly before him.

"Do you think you can see? Or shall we have more lamps?" asked Veronica.

"I can see very well — as well as one can, by lamp-light," answered Taquisara, as he placed the

lamps together upon the table, so that the light should fall sideways upon them when they fenced.

Veronica was glad to slip her mask over her face, just then. She was conscious of the fact when she had done it, though she hardly knew what she was doing as she took a foil from the long chest and stepped out into the room to meet Taquisara. Then, as he raised his arm to engage and she still held her foil down, her habitual interest in the amusement momentarily asserted itself.

"Shall we try that feint of yours that you were doing the other day?" she asked. "You know, you touched me with it. I think I can meet it now, for I have been thinking about it."

"Yes, try it!" said Gianluca, from his chair.

"Certainly," answered Taquisara.

Instantly, both fell into position and engaged. Barely crossing foils, Taquisara executed the feint in question at once, and lunged his fullest length. But Veronica had thought out the right parry and answer, and was quicker than he.

His weapon ran past her head without touching her, and as he recovered himself, hers shot out after him. He uttered an exclamation as it ran under his arm, with a little soft resistance.

"Touched!" cried Veronica, at the same instant.

He said nothing. Then, a second later, she uttered a sharp cry of horror, dropped her foil upon the floor and raising her mask stared at him

with wild, white face. Not heeding what she did, she had taken the sharp foil by mistake. It was dark in the corner where the chest stood.

"It is nothing," he said. "It is nothing, I assure you."

"What is the matter?" asked Gianluca, in astonishment, for he could not see that the foil had no button.

But Veronica did not answer him. She was close to Taquisara now, clutching his arm with both hands and staring at the wire mask which covered his face.

"You are hurt! I know you are hurt!" she said, in a voice faint with fear.

"Oh no!" he answered, with a short laugh. "I was a little surprised. Take another foil. It is nothing, I assure you."

"I know you are hurt," she repeated. "Oh God! I might have killed you —"

She felt dizzy, and sick with horror, and she clung to his arm, now, for support.

"Do you mean to say that you had the sharp foil?" asked Gianluca, beginning to understand.

"It is nothing at all," said Taquisara. "It ran through my jacket, just under the arm. It did not touch me."

"It might have run through you," said Gianluca, gravely. "It might have killed you."

"Oh — please — please —" cried Veronica, still

clinging to Taquisara's arm and turning her pale face to Gianluca.

He looked on, and his face changed. There was something in her attitude, just for a few seconds, in her ghastly pallor, in the tones of her voice, that went through Gianluca like a knife. The dreadful instinctive certainty that she loved the man she had so nearly killed, took possession of him in a dark prevision of terror. Veronica was strong and brave, but it would have been strange indeed if she had shown nothing of what she felt.

It did not last long, and perhaps she knew what she had shown, for she dropped Taquisara's arm, and the colour rushed to her face as she stooped and picked up the foil with the green hilt. The hilts of the others were blue, like those of many Neapolitan foils, and in the lamplight she could hardly distinguish the difference.

With sudden anger Veronica set her foot upon the steel and bent it up, trying to break it. She could not, for it was of soft temper, but she bent it out of all shape, so as to be useless.

She forced herself to take another, and they fenced again for a few minutes. Gianluca watched them at first, but soon his head fell back, and he stared at the ceiling. Death had entered into his soul. He had guessed half the truth. But in the state in which he was on that evening, and after what had passed between him and Veron-

ica, the suspicion alone would have been enough. Nothing could have saved him from it, since it was indeed the truth. Such passionate, strong love could only hide itself so long as it lived in the even, unchanging light of monotonous days. In the flash of a danger, a terror, a violent chance, its shape stood out for an instant and was not to be mistaken.

Gianluca scarcely spoke again on that evening. The next morning, before he left his own room, Taquisara was with him, walking up and down and smoking while Gianluca drank his coffee. They had been discussing the accident of the previous evening, and Taquisara had laughed over it. But Gianluca was sad and grave.

"I wish to ask you a question," he said, after a short silence. "When I fainted, that day — did Don Teodoro pronounce all the proper words? You must have heard him. Was it a real marriage, without any defect of form?"

Taquisara stopped in his walk and hesitated. After all, since Don Teodoro had written to him that the marriage must be performed again, it was much better that Gianluca should be prepared for it, since he himself had put the question.

"Since you ask me," answered Taquisara, after a moment's thought, "I may as well tell you what I know. After it was done, both Don Teodoro and I had doubts as to whether the marriage

were perfectly valid, and he determined to consult a bishop. I suppose that he has done so, for he has written to me about it. He says that the ecclesiastical authority before whom the matter was laid declares that there were informalities, and that you must be married again. You see, in the first place, there were no banns published in church, and there was no permission from the bishop to omit publishing them. But, of course, that might be set aside. I fancy that the real trouble may have been that you were unconscious. At all events, it is a very simple matter to be married again."

"In other words, it is no marriage at all. I thought so — I thought so." Gianluca repeated the words slowly and sadly.

"What does it matter?" asked Taquisara, turning away and walking again. "It is a question of five minutes. I should think that you would be glad —"

"Yes — perhaps I am glad," said Gianluca, so low that the words were scarcely an interruption.

"Because you can be married in your full senses," continued Taquisara, bravely, "with your father and mother beside you, and all the rest of it."

Gianluca said nothing to this, and again there was a short silence. Just as Taquisara came to the table in his walk, Gianluca spoke again.

"Stop a moment," he said. "Look at me,

Taquisara. If you were in my place, what would you do?"

Their eyes met, and Gianluca saw the quick effort of the other's features, controlling themselves, as though he had been struck unawares.

"I?" exclaimed Taquisara, taken entirely off his guard. "If I were in your place? Why—" he recovered himself—"I should get married again, as soon as possible, of course. What else should any one do?"

But the bold eyes for once looked down a little, their steadiness broken.

"You would do nothing of the sort," said Gianluca.

"What do you mean?" Again Taquisara started almost imperceptibly, and his brows contracted as he looked up sharply.

"If you were in my place," said Gianluca, "you would cut your throat rather than ruin the life of the woman you loved, by tying your misery to her for life, a load for her to carry."

"Do not say such things!" exclaimed the Sicilian, turning suddenly from the table and resuming his walk. "You are mad!"

"No—not mad. But not cowardly either. There is not much left of me, but what there is shall not be afraid. I am not truly married to her. I will not be. I will not die with that on my soul."

"Gianluca — for God's sake do not say such things!" Taquisara turned upon him, staring.

He sat in his deep chair, his fair angel head thrown back, the dark blue eyes bright, brave, and daring — all the rest, dead.

"I say them, and I mean them," he answered. "I love her very much. I love her enough for that. I love her more than you do."

"Than I?" Taquisara's voice almost broke, as the blow struck him, but there was no fear in his eyes either. He drew a breath then, and spoke strong words. "Now may Christ forget me in the hour of death, if I have not been true to you!"

"And me and mine if I blast your life and hers," came back the unflinching answer.

A deep silence fell upon them both. At last Gianluca spoke again, and his voice sank to another tone.

"She loves you, too," he said.

"Loves me?" cried Taquisara, his brows suddenly close bent. "Oh no! Unsay that, or — no — Gianluca — how dare you even dream the right to say that of your wife?"

It was beyond his strength to bear.

"She is not my wife," said Gianluca. "You have told me so — she is not my wife. She has done what no other living woman could have done, to be my wife and to love me. But she is not my wife, and what I say is true, and right as well, your right and hers.

"No — not that — not hers." Taquisara turned half round, against the table, where he stood, and his voice was low and broken.

"Yes, hers. You will know it soon — when I have taken my love to my grave, and left her yours on earth."

"Gianluca!"

Taquisara could not speak, beyond that, but he laid his hand upon his friend's arm and clutched it, as though to hold him back. His dark eyes darkened, and in them were the terrible tears that strong men shed once in life, and sometimes once again, but very seldom more.

Gianluca's thin fingers folded upon the hand that held him.

"You have been very true to me," he said. "She will be quite safe with you."

For a long time they were both silent. It began to rain, and the big drops beat against the windows, melancholy as the muffled drum of a funeral march, and the grey morning light grew still more dim.

"I will not go into the other room just yet," said Gianluca, quietly. "I would rather be alone for a little while."

Their eyes met once more, and Taquisara went away without a word.

That had been almost the last act of the strange tragedy of love and death which had been lived

out in slow scenes during those many weeks. It was needful that it should come, and inevitable, soon or late. It began when Gianluca made that one last desperate effort to move, in sudden certainty of hope that ended in the instant foreknowledge of what was to be. A little thing swayed him then — such a little thing as the accident of a sharp foil, a rent in a jacket, the woman's blinding fear for the man she loved. There are many arrows in fate's quiver, and the little ones are as keen as the long shafts, and quicker to find the tender mark.

The man was born to suffer, but he had in him that something divine by which martyrs made death the witness of life and turned despair of earth to sure hope of heaven.

He had ever been a man tender and gentle. His nature did not fail him now. With exquisite devotion and thought for Veronica's happiness, and with a love for her that penetrated the short future of near death, he would not say to her what he had said to Taquisara. He would not let one breath of doubt disturb her only satisfaction while he still lived, nor trouble her with the least fear lest she had not done all her fullest to give him happiness while she could. In the end, it was his love that cut short his living, and no one knew what hours and days and nights of pain he bore, till the end came. He made of his love and his

death a way for her life. She had given him all she had. He gave it back to her a hundred-fold, but she should not know, while he lived, that her great gift had not been to him more than she could make it, all that she wished it might be, all that she knew it was not.

He had not far to carry his burden; but except his friend, no one should know the heaviness of his heart, neither his father nor his mother, and least of all, Veronica. He could not hide that he was dying, but he could hide the cost of it, and its bitterness. After that day, his life went from him, as the strength falls away from a ship's sails when the breeze is softly dying on a summer's evening. In fear Veronica watched him, and in fear she met Taquisara's eyes. In the long nights, when it rained and there was no moon, the darkness of death's wings was in the air, and she held her breath, alone in her dim room.

They all knew it, and none said it, though shadow answered shadow in one another's faces when they met. It was as though another element than air had descended amongst them, dull, unresonant, hushing word and tread.

For each life we love is a sun, in our lives that would be dark if there were no love in them, and when it goes down to its setting in our hearts, the last light of love's day is very deep and tender, as no other is after it, and the passionate, sad twilight

of regret deepens to a darkness of great loneliness over all, until our tears are wept, and our souls take of our mortal selves memories of love undying.

The end came soon, in the night, for it was his will to live that had kept him with them so long. Taquisara was with him. One by one the others came, hastily muffled and wrapped in dark robes, for the night was cold and damp even within doors. One after another they came, and they stood and knelt beside him on the right and left. He spoke to them all, — to his father and his mother first, for he felt the tide ebbing. With streaming eyes Veronica bent down and looked for the fading light in his, through her fast-falling tears. And close to her his mother stretched out weak hands that trembled with every breaking sob. His father knelt there, burying his face against the pillow, shaking all over, his arms hanging down loose and helpless by his sides, bent, bowed, crushed, as a weak old lion, stricken in age and cruelly wounded to death. And above them all, Taquisara's sad, deep-chiselled face looked down, as the face of a bronze statue beside a grave. Without, the winter's rain beat a low dead-march on the great windows, and the southwest wind sighed out its vast breath along the castle walls.

It was long since he had spoken, and they thought that they should never hear his voice

again. But still the last light lingered in his eyes. Very little was left for him to do.

He moved Veronica's right hand, that was in his, drawing it a little, and she let it move; and his other held Taquisara's, and he drew it also, they yielding, till the two touched, and at his dying will clasped one another. Then he smiled faintly, his last smile on earth. And as it faded forever, there came back to them from beyond all pain the words of his blessing upon their two strong young lives.

"Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus —" and the angels heard the rest.

Thus died Gianluca della Spina.

THE END.